



Motivating exercise through social media

Thesis presented by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work and it has never been presented to any institution or university for the award of Degree or Diploma.



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ABSTRACT

The exponential growth of social media and online fitness classes in the last decade of the twenty first century, has provided a multitude of opportunities for individuals and businesses. The internet has created new opportunities that people in the past might not have even dreamed of; from typing a question into a smart phone device and receiving millions of results, to participating in online fitness classes through platforms such as Zoom, Instagram and Facebook live. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the extent of motivations for following health and fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to participate in general exercise and online fitness classes. The impact of Covid 19 on gym closures has brought a boom to engagement in online fitness classes rendering this a timely study for investigation. A research instrument was developed to include online surveys and netnography. The netnographic study covered Instagram posts over a four-week period on two health and fitness influencers: The Body Coach and Trisha's Transformation. The findings suggest strongly that there is a direct correlation between fitness influencers posts on Instagram and participation in general exercise and attending online fitness classes. The study found that half of those who said they use online classes due to lockdown would continue to use online classes after lockdown was over. It was also revealed that the follower count on social media is negatively associated with follower engagement. The higher the follower count the lower the follower engagement.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that companies should seriously consider including influencers as part of their social media marketing strategy. However, the number of followers of the social media influencer should also be a factor in the decision-making process. In addition, the use of a mixed methodological approach was crucial to determine valid results for this dissertation.

Keywords: social media influencer, engagement, exercise, fitness classes, Instagram, motivation, inspiration.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Dissertation Structure Overview	1
1.3 Research Questions and Objectives	2
1.3.1 Research Objectives	3
1.4 Fitness Industry	3
1.4.1 The influence of the Global Coronavirus pandemic on Irish Fitness Industry	6
1.5 Social Media and Marketing	6
1.6 Methodology Overview	8
Chapter 2 Literature Review	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Physical Activity	9
2.3 Evolution of (at home) Fitness Classes	11
2.4 Changing nature and trends in the Internet	12
2.5 Social Media	12
2.5.3 Social Media Marketing Concepts	13
2.5.4 Social Media Community and Brand Loyalty	13
2.5.5 Social Media and Fitness	15
2.5.6 Social Media Influencers	16
2.6 Covid 19 Digital Impacts	20
Chapter 3 Research Methodology	22
3.1 Introduction	22
3.2 Research Design	22
3.2.1 Survey	24
3.2.2 Netnography	25
3.3 Data Analysis	27
3.3.1 Online Survey Data Analysis	28
3.3.2 Netnography analysis	29
3.3.3 Data Representation	34
3.4 Ethics	34

3.4.1 Online Survey Ethics	35
3.4.2 Netnography Ethics.....	36
3.5 Pilot Test.....	38
3.6 Methodology Limitations	40
Chapter 4 Findings (Quantitative Analysis).....	42
4.1 Introduction	42
4.2 Survey.....	42
4.2.1 Demographic characteristics.....	43
4.2.1 Health and Fitness Classes	44
4.2.2 Purchase behaviour	48
4.2.3 Online fitness classes	52
4.2.4 Social Media Usage	58
4.3 Netnography	64
4.3.1 The Body Coach.....	65
4.3.2 Trishas Transformation Netnography Findings.....	72
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	80
5.1. Introduction	80
5.2 Social Media Engagement.....	80
5.2.1 Instagram.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.2 Follower Engagement	81
5.2.3 Social Media Ads	88
5.2.4 Videos versus Photos	91
5.3 Fitness Influencers	91
5.3.1 Motivation and Inspiration.....	91
5.3.1.2 Body Coach ‘Motivation’	93
5.4 Harmful effects of social media.....	95
5.5 Exercise and online fitness classes.....	95
5.5.1 Disadvantages to online exercise classes.....	98
5.5.2 Advantages of online exercise classes	99
5.6 Limitations.....	100
Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations	102
6.1 Introduction	102
6.2 Research purpose.....	102
6.3 Research Design	103
6.4 Main Findings	103
6.6 Recommendations	105

6.6.1	Recommendations for health and fitness influencers	105
6.6.2	Recommendations for individuals following influencers.....	106
6.6.3	Recommendations for companies hiring influencers	106
6.7	Future Research	106
6.8	Conclusion	107
	Bibliography	108
	Appendix A	116
	Appendix B	124
	Appendix C	125
	Appendix D	126
	Appendix E	127
	Appendix F	128
	Appendix G	129
	Appendix H	141
	Appendix I	145

List of Figures

Figure 1 Health Club Members by Generation in 2018 (IHRSA, 2020)	4
Figure 2 Why people work out in the gym (Statista 2020)	5
Figure 3 Amount of exercise recommended for adults each week - Source WHO (2020) ...	10
Figure 4 Conceptual Model for the Relationship of Social Networks and Social Support to Health.....	14
Figure 5 Brand Ambassadors through the years.....	17
Figure 6 Influencer Follower Tiers, (Warren, 2020)	18
Figure 7 Influencer Audience Reach vs Engagement Rate, (Fohr, 2021)	19
Figure 8 Global Consumers who have Used augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) (Westbrook and Angus, 2021),	21
Figure 9 Mixed method of Microsoft Forms and Netnography	28
Figure 10 Example of Likert style question used in this Research	29
Figure 11 Labelling of videos and photos on Excel.....	31
Figure 12 A research ethics process flowchart for netnography	38
Figure 13 Calculations for response rate.....	42
Figure 14 State of their health	44
Figure 15 Main motivation for attending fitness classes	45
Figure 16 Classes participated in.....	46
Figure 17 Class type preferred	46
Figure 18 Age by type of class attended	46
Figure 19 Gender by class preferred	47
Figure 20 Exercise type	47
Figure 21 Other exercise activity	48
Figure 22 Weekly spend on fitness training.....	48
Figure 23 Marketing.....	49
Figure 24 Research.....	49
Figure 25 Impulse buying decisions	50
Figure 26 Recommendation.....	50
Figure 27 Promotions, deals and discounts	51
Figure 28 Free online classes	51
Figure 29 Supports current health & fitness requirements.....	52
Figure 30 Purchase same class.....	52
Figure 31 Online classes	53
Figure 32 Online platforms	53
Figure 33 Negative perceptions and expectations.....	54
Figure 34 Positive experience	55
Figure 35 Classes participated in.....	55
Figure 36 Payment	56
Figure 37 Advantages for online classes	57
Figure 38 Disadvantages to online fitness classes	57
Figure 39 Suggested improvements to online classes	58
Figure 40 Favourite Social Media Platform.....	59
Figure 41 Use of Social Media	60
Figure 42 Main reason for using social media	61

Figure 43 Time on Social Media	62
Figure 44 Follow Fitness Influencers.....	62
Figure 45 Interaction with Fitness Influencers.....	63
Figure 46 Posts shared by influencers	63
Figure 47 Likely to share a post.....	64
Figure 48 Most frequent used hashtags	68
Figure 49 Hashtags only used once.....	68
Figure 50 Hashtags only used once.....	71
Figure 51 Hashtags only used once.....	71
Figure 52 Trivia Question	72
Figure 53 Most frequent hashtags used	76
Figure 54 Most frequent hashtags used in photographs.....	79
Figure 55 Paid partnership (Ad) with Goustocooking - March 30th 2021	89
Figure 56 Trishas Transformation Paid Ad with Aldi - 25 March 2021.....	91
Figure 57 Images of Trishas Journey.....	93
Figure 58 Trishas Transformation - Inspirational Quote - March 7th 2021	97
Figure 59 Trishas Daily 5k Walk inspiration - March 17 th	98

List of Tables

Table 1 A Qualitative Analysis of Body Image on Social Media: Implications for Public Health Practice.....	30
Table 2 Netnographic analysis of health and fitness influencers Instagram posts.....	33
Table 3 Survey Demographics	43
Table 4 Body Coach Instagram Audience.....	66
Table 5 Summary Table of video posts	67
Table 6 Summary of photograph posts.....	70
Table 7 Trisha Transformation Instagram Audience	73
Table 8 Trisha Transformation Video Post Summary	75
Table 9 Trisha Transformation Photograph Post Summary	78
Table 10 Reasons why survey respondents follow social media influencers	83
Table 11 Trishas questions from followers and her answers.....	85
Table 12 Body Coach questions and answers by his followers.....	86

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The researcher is a qualified Fitness Coach and owner of a Gym in Headford, County Galway. In addition, the researcher is also employed by The Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and is responsible for social media for The Galway International Hotel School. The ability of social media to influence decisions of individuals to use online fitness classes is of particular interest to the researcher. It was this interest of social media and the surrounding area of digital marketing that developed the inspiration to investigate the extent of motivations for following health and fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to participate in general exercise and online fitness classes.

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the extent of motivations for following health and fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to participate in general exercise and online fitness classes. It will explore social media content shared by two health and fitness influencers and research what their followers are saying on their public Instagram feed. In addition, it will examine the perceptions and actual experience of users of online fitness classes. The combination of text and images in social media platforms presents new opportunities for research that can potentially offer a deep investigation of participant behavior in online cultures and communities (Jong, 2016).

This chapter starts with the dissertation structure overview (Section 1.2). It then informs the reader of researchers position in the study and provides a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study (Section 1.3) along with the research objectives and questions (Section 1.4). A brief introduction to the major research topics of the study will be discussed. These research topics include the Fitness Industry (Section 1.4) and social media and marketing (Section 1.5). This chapter will also briefly introduce the methodology (Section 1.6) and scope and limitations of the research (Section 1.7) and will conclude with the overall structure of this thesis (Section 1.8).

1.2 Dissertation Structure Overview

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapters One, *Introduction*, briefly states the research purpose, objectives and questions. It merely describes the current trends in

the fitness industry and social media marketing. Furthermore, it explains the researchers position in the study and her reasoning for choosing this topic. A short description of the research methodology is provided and finally, it gives a concise overview of the structure of this dissertation.

Chapter Two *Literature Review* examines the academic work published in themes relevant to this study. It outlines the changing nature and trends on the internet and recent significant research results related to the theories of social media marketing. It explores the effect of Digital Media on the Fitness Industry and highlights the connection between Brand Loyalty and Digital Celebrities.

Chapter three discusses the methodological approach used to examine peoples' perceptions, expectations and their social media behaviour. A mixed method of online surveys targeting staff at a higher-level Education Institute of Technology and a netnographic study is discussed in great detail. The chapter also looks at the ethical considerations in conducting both forms of primary research.

Chapter four Findings examines the analysis of the online survey and netnographic study. Chapter five Discussions, analyses and discusses the findings in relation to the earlier studies reviewed in the literature. Chapter six Conclusion and Recommendations summarises the entire research project in line with its methodology and findings. It concludes how the study achieves its aims and objectives in the end. It discusses the limitations, recommendations and the contributions the study may have to further research.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

As noted by Global Media Marketing (2021), social media is one of the most important sources to spread information to online consumers, therefore, these primary research questions have been formulated to be the foundation of this study:

1. What impact do Instagram health and fitness influencers have on a person's motivation to participate in exercise and more specifically in online fitness classes? Is there a gender specific attraction to male and female health and fitness influencers?

2. How does the number of followers on an influencers Instagram account affect their follower engagement? What are the implications of this for the influencers themselves and for those hiring influencers?
3. What are the health implications for people who are in sedentary positions for most of their working day? Do they exercise more or less as a direct result of their long periods of sedentary position?

1.3.1 Research Objectives

The author has recognised some key research objectives that will be necessary in order to successfully answer the research question:

1. Discover the motivations for following fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to exercise.
2. Investigate participation in online exercise classes and its connection to social media influence to enhance or suppress motivation
3. Explore the influencer follower tier, that is nano, micro, mid, macro and mega macro and determine if those with larger follower numbers have more or less follow engagement.
4. Explore the theoretical framework around people working in sedentary positions for long periods of time and its impact on their health.

1.4 Fitness Industry

Digital health and fitness technology are challenging the concept of traditional fitness models. As noted by Sassatelli (2010), the fitness industry today stretches much further than just the gym; fitness has become a phenomenon enmeshed in the lives of many individuals. The emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), higher levels of wealth, more leisure time, and changes in values and lifestyles due to a new consciousness regarding one's own needs as well as regarding social responsibilities, have led to a new breed of consumer (Hudson, 2008). The internet has revolutionised information provision and purchasing patterns globally. Tate et al. (2015), postulate that the internet, accessed via computer or smartphone, has been the

predominant technology used for physical activity promotion and that self-monitoring devices, mobile application (apps), social media, and video games are newer tools.

The fitness industry includes a diverse scope of organisations. Any entity, be it a person or company, if the main spotlight is on exercise, health, and general well-being of the body, it lies within the remit of the fitness industry. The primary objective of the fitness industry is to service the customer with products and services that promote health. Fitness has become a phenomenon immersed in the lives of many individuals. Consumers can now choose from a variety of exercise formats from local and small gyms around the globe, independent personal trainers to Health and Fitness Apps and online health and fitness influencers.

The total number of times Americans used gyms rose from 4.6 billion visits in 2010 to 6.7 billion visits in 2019, an impressive 45% increase (IHRSA, 2020). In support of this, Statista (2020b), argue that the global fitness and health club industry now exceeds 96 billion U.S. dollars since 2019. According to their report Millennials (born from 1980 to 1999) are now the largest cohort, representing 33% of all health club members, followed by Generation X (born from 1965 to 1979) at 24%, Baby Boomers (born from 1945 to 1964) at 22% and Generation Z (those born after the year 2000) at 14% (see figure 1).

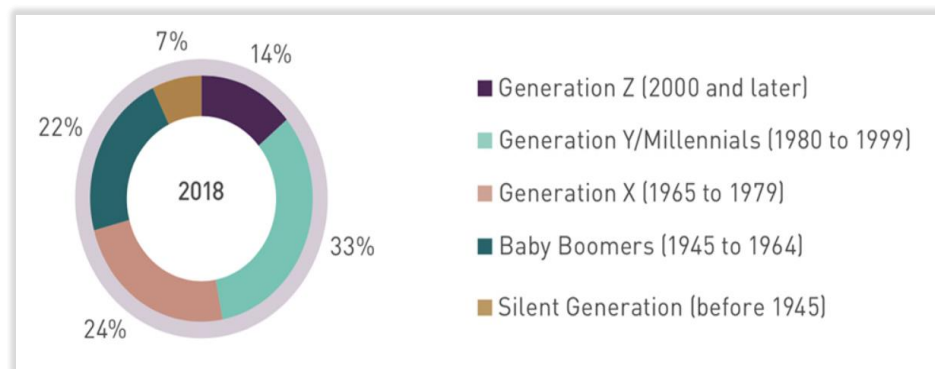


Figure 1 Health Club Members by Generation in 2018 (IHRSA, 2020)

According to Statista (2020b), 54% of their US survey respondents said the main reason they go to the gym is to stay healthy and 41% feel it helps them to reduce their weight (see figure 2).

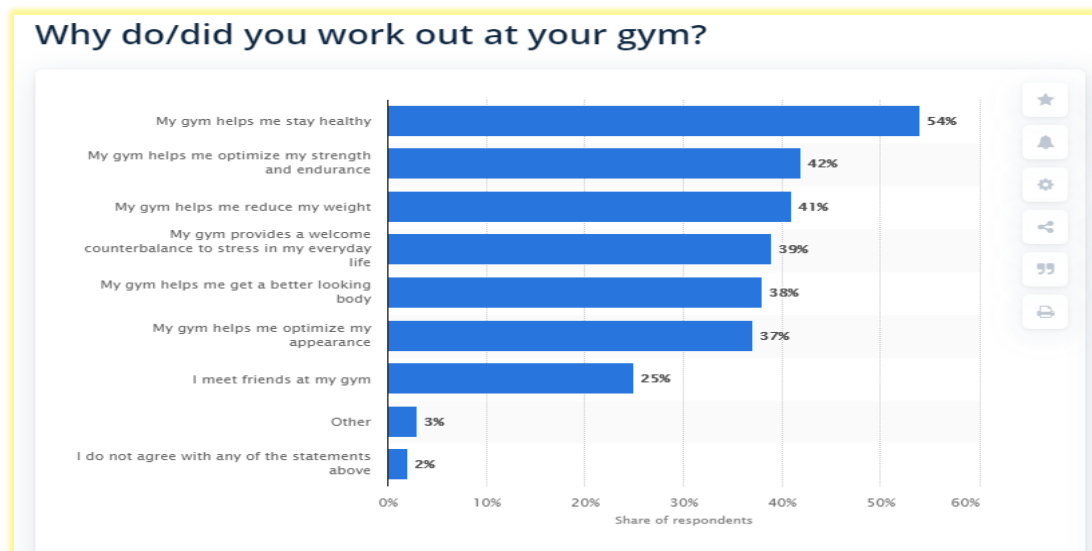


Figure 2 Why people work out in the gym (Statista 2020)

A recent report by Deloitte and not-for-profit group Europe Active estimated that the health and fitness industry across the EU was worth €27.2 billion in 2018, a value which was up only 1.2% from the previous year. Globally the fitness industry is growing, however, the Irish Industry shows that 500,000 people in the Republic of Ireland are fitness club members in an industry worth up to €300 million annually (Irish Examiner, 2019). While the fitness industry across the EU has experienced a boom in recent years to reach €27 billion annually, Ireland lags behind with only 10% of the population having fitness memberships - half the European norm (Karjaluo et al., 2015).

CSO (2018), have projected that the population in Ireland will grow from its current 4.96 million to 6.69 million in 2051. In recent years, overweight and obesity levels have increased dramatically with 61% of adults and one in four children in Ireland either overweight or obese (Gov.ie, 2021). It is estimated that the cost to society in Ireland of adult obesity exceeds €1 billion per annum. Overweight and obesity are significant risk factors for many chronic diseases. According to their research the links between obesity and heart disease, cancers, type 2 diabetes, mental health issues, respiratory problems and musculoskeletal conditions are well established. Health comprises the second largest component of public expenditure in Ireland after social protection (Assets.gov.ie, 2021). The Department of Health have developed the Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025 as a roadmap for building a healthier Ireland, where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential, where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is

everyone's responsibility. Since the launch of this framework in 2018, the people of Ireland have become more aware of the importance and benefit of exercise and leading healthier lifestyles.

1.4.1 The influence of the Global Coronavirus pandemic on Irish Fitness Industry

Measures were taken by the Irish Government in March 2020 to stop the spread of Covid 19. Ireland was placed on its first full lockdown with all non-essential journeys banned and physical exercise was limited within 2km of peoples' own home (Mangan, 2020). Restrictions were eased on 12th May 2020 to allow people to travel up to 5 kilometres from their home to exercise. However, no indoor or outdoor exercise group activities were permitted, no exercise or dance classes, no indoor or outdoor gatherings involving "individual training" except for professional and elite sports (Gov.ie, 2021). These restrictions remain in place as of April 2021. Similar to Ireland, neighbouring UK Prime Minister combined the announcement of the country's lockdown on 22nd March 2020. While lockdown entailed restrictions on daily movement and freedoms that were unprecedented in peace time, exercising outside - once a day 'on your own or with members of your household' - was cited as a valid but exceptional reason for leaving one's home. The only other reasons cited were to buy essential items (food or medication), care for others, and attend work (although employers were encouraged to facilitate home working where possible). Exercise was given this exceptional status due to beliefs about physical and mental health benefits, but other popular places to exercise, such as gyms, leisure centres, swimming pools, and sport clubs, were forced to close (Malcolm and Velija, 2020). Due to the lockdown many people sought alternative ways of participating in exercise and have pursued online fitness classes as a means to resolve this issue.

1.5 Social Media and Marketing

Internet has revolutionized the marketing world. Social Media Networking has started influencing the way individuals and business enterprises communicate, (Nair and Subramaniam, 2012). In today's world, online conversation often takes the format of several communicative platforms and involves a multitude of community members. In the space of ten years, social media has changed drastically. Personal blogs on MySpace and pictures of university students on FaceMash have evolved to cover

billions of Facebook users, and also expanded into business and employment-related services such as LinkedIn (Ericson, 2018).

For those within the business world, many have had difficulties of grasping what it is and why it became such a phenomenon. Nevertheless, there is increasing evidence that organizations eagerly engage in social media, attempt to find a proper perspective on what it means and what it can do to the company. Developing interesting social media content that increases consumer engagement has become one of the most important challenges managers face today. Regardless, most companies have now, moving with technology, entered the online world and use several social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube to reach out to their consumer base.

A plethora of health and fitness-related social media content is available and is popular, diverse, and interactive; when social media users “like” or “follow” health and fitness-related social media content pages, content appears in their newsfeeds where the user can view and engage with the content by commenting on photos or sharing with friends (through “tagging” or reposting content). Carrotte et al. (2015) refer to one type of health and fitness-related social media content, “fitspiration,” the amalgamation of the words fitness and inspiration, which are messages designed to inspire individuals to achieve a health or fitness goal, usually through exercise and dieting. Common forms of fitspiration include images of toned bodies overlaid with quotes designed to motivate viewers. Health and fitness-related social media content is commonly posted by companies to sell a service or product (an example would be personal trainers, gyms, or brands of juice detoxes). Health and fitness-related social media content can also be user-generated and maintained; for example, some social media users commonly post exercise “selfies” (self-portrait photographs), statuses about fitness routines, and images of healthy food desired or prepared by the user. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015), argue that the medium of Instagram might be seen as inherently self-objectifying, in that users post photos, often of themselves, explicitly for viewing by others.

1.6 Methodology Overview

It was decided to conduct an approach which utilised both an online survey and netnographic study of two influencers. A mixed method of quantitative and qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to answer the research question. The survey sample of staff in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) were chosen as they fitted the criteria for the selection process.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents relevant literature to the research topic and shows the advancement of findings throughout time. A wide range of relevant journals and publications in multi-disciplinary areas such as fitness, social media, marketing, purchasing behaviour and brand loyalty have been reviewed. In addition to academic publications, data published by government, trade and professional associations, market research companies, consultancy companies, and educational institutions have been analysed. This literature review informed the researchers own thinking and thereby set the conceptual context for the study.

The chapter starts with a detailed explanation of physical activity and the fitness industry (Section 2.2). Changing nature and trends in the Internet will be discussed (Section 2.3). Research topics will further include Social Media Channels and influencers (Section 2.4). This chapter will also reveal the Covid 19 Digital Impact (Section 2.5).

2.2 Physical Activity

Physical activity as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscle that requires energy expenditure (WHO, 2018). It can be undertaken in many ways: walking, cycling, sports and active forms of recreation (such as dance, yoga, tai chi). Caspersen et al. (1985), argue that “Physical activity,” “exercise”, and “physical fitness” are terms that describe different concepts but are often confused with one another. He conceptualises that physical activity in daily life can be categorized into occupational, sports, conditioning, household, or other activities. Furthermore, exercise is a subset of physical activity that is planned, structured, and repetitive and has as a final or an intermediate objective the improvement or maintenance of physical fitness. Finally, he establishes that physical fitness is a set of attributes that are either health or skill related.

Worldwide, 1 in 4 adults, do not currently meet the global recommendations for physical activity set by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018). Their research advocates that physical activity is proven to help prevent and treat noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and breast and colon cancer.

They argue that it also helps to prevent hypertension, overweight and obesity and can improve mental health, quality of life and well-being. Alarming, their research shows that the global cost of physical inactivity is estimated to be INT\$ 54 billion per year in direct health care, in 2013, with an additional INT\$ 14 billion attributable to lost productivity. Inactivity accounts for 1–3% of national health care costs, although this excludes costs associated with mental health and musculoskeletal conditions.

In 2020, WHO published Guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Their findings show a significant increase in the body of evidence on the health impact of different types, amounts and durations of physical activity, as well as the behaviours and its interrelationship with levels of physical activity and health. Their research recommend that adults should do at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity; or at least 75–150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity; or an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous-intensity activity throughout the week, for substantial health benefits (see figure 3).

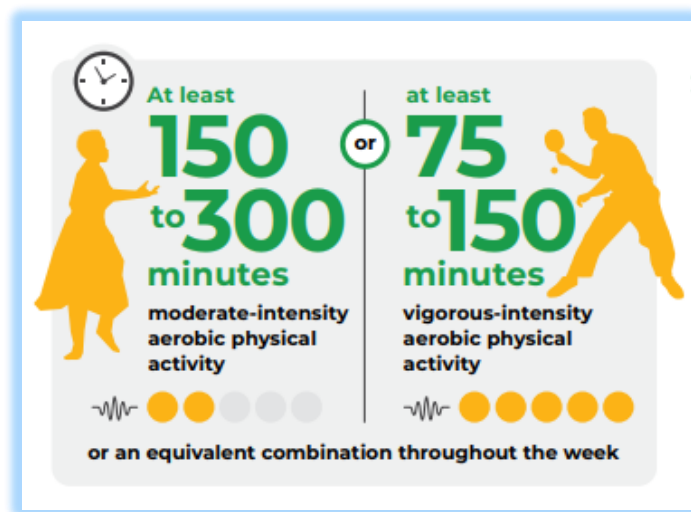


Figure 3 Amount of exercise recommended for adults each week - Source WHO (2020)

In order to understand why people, get involved in the many forms of physical activity it is important to reflect on the conceptual framework of Maslow, who in 1943, was the first to connect motivation to a hierarchy of needs, from physiological to psychological (Lemur, 2018). He suggests that needs are layered in order of importance with the first being physiological needs, then safety, social, esteem and self-actualization needs. Research carried out over the past decade informs us that consumers have increasingly utilised fitness facilities to meet their physical activity needs and overall health goals.

However, Gaule (2005), argues that exercise is not just a physiological need and that research on effects of body cultures on mental health have inferred that physical activity is an important coping strategy in which to reduce stress, anxiety, increase self-esteem as well as influence aspects of personality. In this respect, physical activity is also seen as an important health behaviour and coping mechanism, which people use to alleviate stress in their lives and it has therefore become a psychological need.

Other interesting research carried out by WHO (2020), has helped answer the question ‘Does level of physical activity modify the effect of sedentary behaviour on mortality?’ Sedentary behaviour is defined as any waking behaviour characterized by an energy expenditure ≤ 1.5 metabolic equivalents, such as sitting, reclining, or lying down (World Health Organisation, 2018). Overall WHO findings show that the effect of sedentary behaviour is stronger in those who do low amounts of moderate – to vigorous-intensity physical activity can mitigate the unfavourable health outcomes associated with higher levels of sedentary behaviours which leads to all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease mortality and cancer mortality. Based on their evidence they recommend that moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity should be recommended for those individuals who undertake high levels of sedentary behaviour and that the benefits outweigh the risks.

Having noted this evidence, it underpins the significance of this research project, as the target audience for the online survey are employees of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, where many staff are sitting at their desk for the most part of their working day. This proved to be one of the justifications for the sample choice.

2.3 Evolution of (at home) Fitness Classes

In 1968, Kenneth Cooper’s ground-breaking book ‘Aerobics’ was first published and Andreasson & Johansson (2014), argue that this book resulted in a rapid development of different forms of fitness exercises where the concept of aerobics became well-known as a specific form of exercise. The ‘keep-fit’ boom in the 1970’s and 1980’s illustrate one way in which society, has attempted to come to grips with the post-modern world (Gaule, 2005).

Parallel with the development in bodybuilding, women like Jane Fonda and others developed a specific form of gymnastics and choreographed movements, labelled as workout (Mansfield, 2011). Fonda advocated a life where fitness is compatible with

child-care and domestic work. Her videos targeted an audience of housewives, making it possible to exercise in front of the television at home. Mansfield indicates that the original Jane Fonda workout video (1982) sold approximately 17 million copies worldwide; the most of any home video which stimulated sales of the then new videocassette recorder (VCR), enabled people (mainly women) to do the workout at home and helped to develop the home video industry. The emergence of the workout books and videos encouraged the use of the comfort, privacy, convenience, and security of domestic / home environments for practising the fitness regimes. It could be argued that this foundation of workouts from home was a building block to the recent phenomena of the provision of the current live online fitness classes that fitness coaches all over the world now embrace.

2.4 Changing nature and trends in the Internet

With the rapid diffusion of Web 2.0 as a user-friendly multimedia information space there has been a paradigm shift in the way people interact, learn, obtain knowledge, and generally communicate. Kozinets (2011), argues that change from a ‘one to many’ channel, to a ‘many to many’, and concurrently to a ‘one to one’ channel, has caused a paradigm shift in the way that we communicate. He reveals that the online, or virtual, communities of the Internet have expanded from small cloisters of academic-military personnel to encompass practically the entire range of human social behaviour, everything from beading to bondage, political spoofing to terrorist-proofing, i-banking to e-dating. Therefore, globalization is made possible due to internet, which enables a customer to reach its buyer without the boundary of a geographic location. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), advocate how more and more consumers use tools such as online discussion forums, consumer review sites, weblogs, and social network sites to exchange product information. Furthermore, they argue that online ‘Word of Mouth’ can provide the opportunity to consumers to read other consumers’ consumption opinions and experiences as well as write contributions by themselves.

2.5 Social Media

Arguably one of the biggest novel concepts brought about by the internet is social media. Defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web

2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. There are different types of social media and each of them has its own distinguished feature.

Social Media came to prominence in the 1990s with the development of online newsgroups, forums and chat rooms which then evolved to include discussion boards and social networking web sites (O'Reilly et al., 2012). Social networking sites can supplement or replace in-person social networks, with the potential advantages of allowing for anonymity and asynchronous interaction while overcoming barriers of physical distance or geographic isolation (Tate et al., 2015).

Recent decades have seen a dramatic growth of social networking platform usage and it is now a social phenomenon with digital, mobile, and social media having become an indispensable part of everyday life for people all over the world. Appendix H provides more details on social media global statistics, social media platforms.

2.5.3 Social Media Marketing Concepts

Moreover, social media changes the rule of marketing practice as well as the idea behind brand building and brand communication. What consumers now hear or read about brands from other consumers or communities through social media is becoming much more important than what marketers say about their own brands.

According to (CSO, 2019) 71% of Irish enterprises employing 10 or more people used some type of social media. Their recent study found that 71% of Irish enterprises stated they used social networks, up from 67% in 2017. The use of multimedia content sharing websites increased from 23% of enterprises in 2017 to 35% of enterprises in 2019.

Ericson (2018), do not believe that social media has yet peaked. Citing their research, over 3 billion people access at least one social media service on a regular basis. Globally, between 2014 and 2018, average time spent on social media apps increased by almost 60 percent, from 30 minutes a day in 2014 to 47 in 2018.

2.5.4 Social Media Community and Brand Loyalty

The development of social media has resulted in the establishment of online consumer communities, encouraging consumers to generate content and voice opinions to provide their peers with information in relation to their previous experience with the consumption of products or services (Lizhen Xu, 2014). Scarapicchia et al. (2016),

postulate that having supportive social relationships can reduce the likelihood of individuals adopting unhealthy behaviours, by minimizing the impact of daily stressors or stressful events or by engaging in health behaviours such as Physical Activity.

Glanz et al. (2002), provide a model (see figure 4) that depicts the mechanisms through which social networks and social support may have positive effects on physical, mental, and social health. They argue that social networks and social support are the starting point or initiator of a causal flow toward health outcomes. Similar to Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs, Glanz et al. points out that by meeting basic human needs for companionship, intimacy, a sense of belonging, and reassurance of one’s worth as a person, supportive ties may enhance well-being and health, regardless of stress levels. They argue that social networks and social support can enhance an individual’s ability to access new contacts and information to identify and solve problems. What they fail to discuss, however, is the negative impact that derives from social networks that can impact on negative mental health issues.

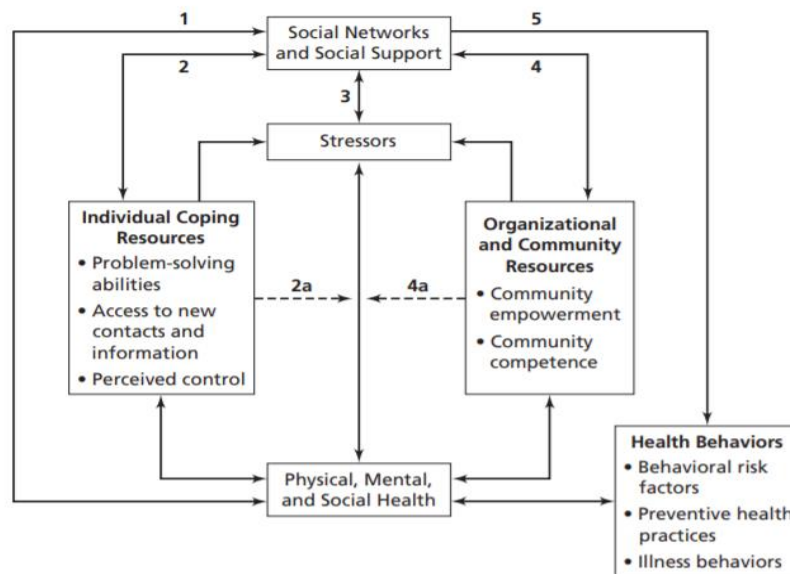


Figure 4 Conceptual Model for the Relationship of Social Networks and Social Support to Health

Companies have realised that it is not enough just to have a huge social following, engagement with the community is a very important factor. Every active engagement brings communities closer to a company’s brand, which increases brand visibility. It is generally agreed upon that in order to get someone motivated or engaged, he or she

needs to feel that the activity is beneficial (Gwinner, et. al, 1998; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Wasko and Faraj, 2005).

2.5.5 Social Media and Fitness

Digital information is affecting daily healthy decisions about exercise, nutrition and maintaining good mental wellbeing. It is widely recognised that social relationships and affiliation have powerful effects on physical and mental health (Berkman *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, social networks influence health and well-being in various ways, including by facilitating the exchange of social support. Consistent empirical evidence from Heaney (2008), suggests that people who maintain strong social relationships are healthier and live longer. Consistent with this theory Tate et al. (2015), asserts that social networking sites can supplement or replace in-person social networks, with the potential advantages of allowing for anonymity and asynchronous interaction while overcoming barriers of physical distance or geographic isolation. This is further supported by Vaterlaus et al. (2015), who contend that social networking websites could be beneficial for encouraging healthier behaviour by providing users with the possibility of discovering and showcasing themselves.

A plethora of health and fitness-related social media content is available to people on both public and private online forums. Feng & Xie (2015), dictate that the use of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have become a method of obtaining and educating audiences with health and fitness information. Tate et al. (2015), emphasise that prior to the dramatic growth in and adoption of social media, systematic reviews had concluded that strong evidence exists on the effectiveness of social support interventions in community settings for increasing physical activity in adults.

A qualitative study conducted by Vaterlaus et al. (2015), identified three general themes associated with health behaviours reported by social media users: 1) social media can be both a motivator and a barrier to exercise, 2) the connection between social media and food, and 3) perceptions of exercise pictures and posts online. Despite broad interest in the influence of social media on health behaviour, few studies have examined the relative effectiveness of different types of social media content for motivating health behaviours such as exercise.

Zhou & Krishnan (2019), dictate that habitual exercising is an important precursor to both physical and psychological well-being thus, there is a strong interest in identifying

key factors that can best motivate individuals to sustain a regular exercise regime. They postulate the importance of psychographic factors where social media may act as an external motivator by allowing users to interact and communicate about exercise online. In contrast, Johnston & Davis (2018), contradicts this by asserting that exercise-related social media content perceived as an advertisement, being manipulative, bragging, or humblebragging may make people less likely to use that information to inform their beliefs and intentions to exercise.

2.5.6 Social Media Influencers

As defined by Pixlee (2020), a social media influencer is a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry. In addition, Tafesse and Wood (2021), cite that influencers have accumulated a dedicated following by crafting an authentic online persona, have access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue to their authenticity and reach. Furthermore, Glofox Blog (2020), postulate that influencers on social media platforms are found to be successful in endorsing brands and products and influencing purchase intentions of their followers. They are ordinary people who have become famous by using social media to create loyal followers. Marwick (2015), further identifies that Instagram, for many others is a platform for amplifying fame already achieved in another medium. However, in this study, Joe Wicks (aka The Body Coach) and Trisha Lewis (aka Trishas Transformation) are what Marwick refers to as Instafame. It was their posts and engagement on Instagram that enabled them to achieve their micro celebrity status.

Followers can comment directly on posts with questions, comments or concerns and influencers are able to comment directly back to them. Through commenting, followers also have a platform to create a community around the influencer's ideas. People often tag friends in comments to bring them to the post and this creates a bigger following for the influencer as well as a community of like-minded people.

Social media influencers have evolved over generations. Hundreds of years ago, the royal family was singing the praises of Josiah Wedgwood's pottery, and today he is a household name (see figure 5). Celebrities have always been involved in advertising products like laundry detergent and cigarettes, and many brands even developed their own celebrities in the form of characters like Tony the Tiger and Flo from Progressive (Ahmad, 2018). What started as Josiah Wedgwood giving royal endorsements for his

pottery then, has evolved all the way into Kourtney Kardashian posting an Instagram story of her drinking Fit Tea.

Anne Sheridan and Bing Crosby posed for cigarette ads in the forties, TV star Bill Cosby (however controversial as of lately) danced during Jell-O commercials and NBA athletes like Michael Jordan have starred in commercials for the sports drink Gatorade (Holmes, Chris 2013). While advertisers have used paid endorsers for many decades, influencer marketing provides connectivity and engagement between consumers and brands via digital and social media channels previously unavailable (Childers et al., 2019).



Figure 5 Brand Ambassadors through the years

McCann (2017), found that 42% of Americans trust brands and marketers less today than they did 20 years ago. When looking specifically at U.S. Internet users, foundational media channels such as print, television, direct mail, radio, and outdoor maintained much higher levels of trust when making a purchasing decision versus the online options of digital pop-ups, online banner ads, and paid social media advertisements (eMarketer, 2016). Eighty-three percent of U.S. consumers trust peer recommendations over advertising (Nielsen, 2015).

2.5.6.1 Influencer Categories

According to Warren (2021), in the influencer marketing industry, influencers are commonly categorized into 5 different tiers based on their Instagram follower count (see figure 6).

- Nano: 0K – 10K, Micro: 10K-100K, Mid: 100K – 500K
- Macro: 500K – 1M, Mega Macro: 1M+

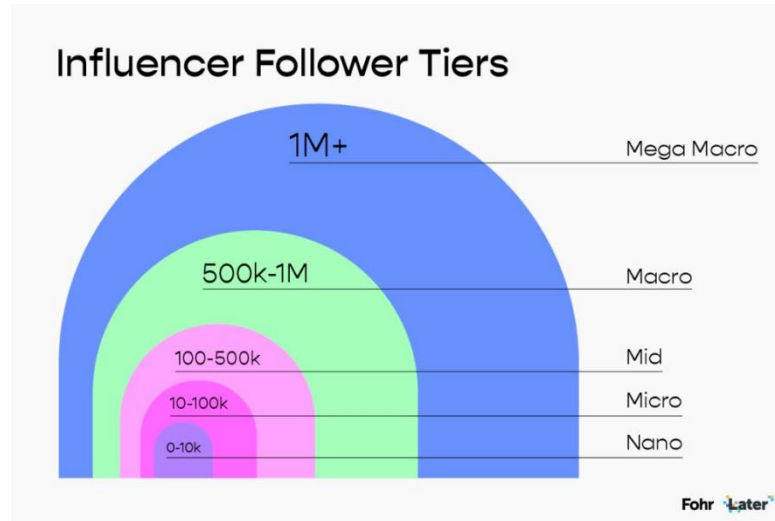


Figure 6 Influencer Follower Tiers, (Warren, 2020)

Each influencer tier has its own strengths and weaknesses. According to Fohr (2021), Macro and Mega Macro influencers, for example, have gigantic audiences — making them a great choice for campaigns where mass awareness is key. Their near-celebrity status has the power to shift a brand’s perception by association alone. Nano and Micro influencers have a much smaller, but often more targeted, audience, making them a great choice for brands looking to tap into hyper-niche communities. Mid influencers are usually working as an influencer full-time, and their content quality, campaign experience, and payment rates will reflect that.

Interestingly, Nano influencers have the highest average feed post reach rate of all influencer tiers, but their overall following is significantly lower. One would have to work with dozens of Nano influencers to reach the same volume of people as a Micro, Mid, Macro, or Mega Macro influencer would reach in a single post (see figure 7).

Tafesse and Wood (2021), present a study linking influencers' follower count, followee count, and content volume with followers's engagement behaviour and investigates whether these relationships are moderated by the breadth of influencers' domains or interest. They allude that followee count is positively associated with follower engagement. Followee count signifies the extent to which influencers seek for information, opinions, and trends from other social media users. Previous research from Arora et al. (2019), has indicated that followee count is essential to establish opinion leadership and build one's influence on social media. By helping to characterize influencers as ordinary social media users, higher followee count can enhance followers' identification with influencers. In essence, followee count exerts the opposite effect on the influencer-follower relationship to that of follower count.



Figure 7 Influencer Audience Reach vs Engagement Rate, (Fohr, 2021)

2.5.6.2 Social media health and fitness influencers

Social media is a prime platform for health and fitness influencers due to its communal energy. Carrotte et al. (2015), believe that it is possible that for many consumers, health and fitness-related social media content is beneficial and provides motivation for healthy behaviours. Its two-way communication makes the influencer approachable and often at times even more motivational. This helps make their brand tailored to their audience and seen as more of a resource than a distant and large entity. Consequently, fitness obsession in the online sphere is rampant, and influencers contribute significantly to the pressure. Not surprisingly Bair et al. (2012), contend that there is a large volume of literature that has reported the negative effects of social media consumption on body image, body satisfaction and eating disorders.

Social media has allowed people to be creative with animation, videography and photography, all on their own mobile devices. For this reason, industries with visual appeal do particularly well on social media and health and fitness is a prime example. People can share videos of circuits or exercises as examples. They can share a series of stories where they show their workouts for the day. Almost every day on Instagram, health and fitness influencer Joe Wicks (aka The Bodycoach) who has millions of followers, posts videos or photos of high intensity workouts or recipes for healthy meals. Trisha's transformation who has thousands of followers, often posts visually inspiring photos of her personal journey of weight loss and her online fan base verbally comment on their love for her honest, down to earth attitude. Both of these influencers created their personal brand to motivate a bigger community. In turn, many of their followers share motivational posts surrounding their experience of exercise and weight loss on Instagram.

2.6 Covid 19 Digital Impacts

As of 30th January 2020, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease, later called COVID-19, was declared a Public Health Emergency and on the 11th of March 2020, COVID-19 was characterized as a pandemic. On April 20th 2020, WHO reported 2,314,621 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and a total of 157,847 deaths from all regions of the world (World Health Organization, 2020). Encouraging or mandating that people should remain within their homes with discontinued daily life activities may unintentionally increase sedentary behaviour, decrease general physical activity, and inflict negative health consequences (Jakobsson *et al.*, 2020).

COVID-19 had a strong impact on the influencer marketing industry. With many businesses having to reassess their operating policies and marketing budgets, the influencer marketing industry saw a hefty year-on-year decline. In fact, between the months of April and June in 2020, the average monthly sponsored post rate was down by over 40% year-on-year (Fohr, 2021).

The pandemic accelerated digital adoption. Digital commerce provides a seamless experience without the in-person component that consumers are familiar with. However, usage varies amongst generations, and businesses needed to account for the disparity between what customers of different ages perceive to be convenient. Younger

consumers prefer digital interactions, whereas older consumers prefer talking to human interaction (Westbrook and Angus, 2021). Consumers embraced internet-connected devices to maintain their daily routines amidst COVID-19 lockdowns. Video conferencing, smart appliances, and technologies like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) helped consumers form new habits around working, learning, exercising, shopping and socialising. These digital tools enabled Phygital Reality, which keeps consumers virtually connected despite being physically separated from the outside world (see figure 8). Phygital Reality is a trend defined by convergence of digital and physical realities – consumers are increasingly integrating virtual processes into their physical spaces with a greater amount of at-home experience (Westbrook and Angus, 2021). The Internet, accessed via computer or smartphone, has been the predominant technology used for physical activity promotion (Tate et al., 2015).

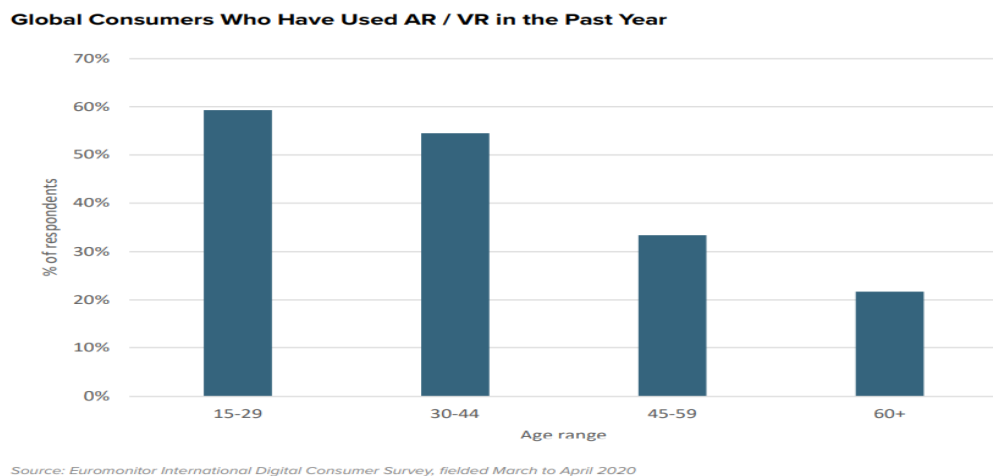


Figure 8 Global Consumers who have Used augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) (Westbrook and Angus, 2021),

Social media consumer behaviour changed significantly in 2020 since the outbreak of the Coronavirus. SproutSocial (2021), report that 50% of consumers increased their social media usage in the last six months of 2020. Fohr (2021), concur by stating that during this time, social media usage soared, with Instagram usage rising by over 40% during the height of pandemic restrictions. With many businesses forced to close their physical doors, Instagram became a social commerce platform for brands to sell products — with influencers acting as the all-important bridge to reach and inspire new customers. As a result, Fohr (2021), argue that the influencer marketing industry slowly bounced back, with the monthly sponsored post rate increasing by 20% year-on-year in December 2020.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological choice of the research and will focus on the stages followed by the researcher in order to prepare, conduct and accomplish their research objective. It consists of 5 main sections with the first 3.2 introducing the research design which incorporated a mixed method of online surveys and a netnographic study. Section 3.3 focuses on the logic of how the data is analysed and data representation. Section 3.4 states the ethical considerations for this study and section 3.5 illustrates the significant contribution of the results of the Pilot test on the overall survey design. Then finally section 3.6 reflects on the methodological limitations.

3.2 Research Design

Early in the study the researcher carried out extensive research around a suitable research design that would facilitate answering the research questions posed:

1. What impact do Instagram health and fitness influencers have on a person's motivation to participate in exercise and more specifically in online fitness classes? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Is there a gender specific attraction to male and female health and fitness influencers?
2. How does the number of followers on an influencers Instagram account affect their follower engagement? What are the implications of this for the influencers themselves and for those hiring influencers?
3. What are the health implications for people who are in sedentary positions for most of their working day? Do they exercise more or less as a direct result of their long periods of sedentary position?

Both qualitative and quantitative literature was reviewed. The great strength of qualitative research is its potential to provide the researcher with descriptive data on means and interpretations given to events within a framework of experience (Greenhalgh and Taylor, 1997). Creswell and Miller (2000) state that

“qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports details of informant, conducts the study in a natural setting.”

This qualitative approach would allow the researcher to develop understandings and interpretations of how people behave on social media platforms. However, Weaver and Lawton (2007) state that qualitative research does not place its emphasis on the collection and analysis of statistical data, therefore, a second approach of quantitative research was required in order to determine the answers the research questions.

In support of this, a paper written by Vaterlaus et al. (2014), with a similar theme to that of this study: “#Gettinghealthy: The perceived influence of social media on young adult health behaviours” used a qualitative focus groups design. In conclusion to their study they recommended that future studies in this area should use diverse samples with a mixed-method design in order not to limit the generalisability of the results. Moreillon (2015), used a mixed method of interviews, online surveys and netnography in her study; “#schoolibrarians Tweet for Professional Development: A Netnographic Case Study of #txlchat”. The purpose of her study was to describe the lived experiences of participants in an online learning community by understanding the relationship between the behaviours of the #txlchat co-moderators and participants and the virtual culture they had co-created. Her mixed methods included both quantitative and qualitative data. It was this research design that informed the choice of data gathering tools for this study. An online survey and netnography were deemed the most suitable instruments for this research. The data was collected over the first quarter of 2021.

This mixed method worked for this particular study as the online survey was conducted prior to the netnography as it informed the selection of influencers for the netnographic study and the data then gathered from the netnography captured the conversations in the social media followers tribal community thus answering the research objectives on peoples motivations for following influencers and their intentions to exercise. It also allowed for use of Creswell (2017) concurrent strategy, in allowing the quantifying of qualitative data in order to seek the answer to the research question on follower count versus follower engagement.

3.2.1 Survey

The objective of the sampling strategy chosen was not to achieve a representative sample, but to include one homogenous group that would be able to provide data relevant to the research investigation.

In order to be eligible to complete this survey participants had to be a user of social media and also fulfil **one** or **both** of the following criteria:

- Have participated in a face-to-face traditional fitness class
- Have participated in an online fitness class

One advantage of the online survey was that it was less time consuming and provided access to a large, concentrated group of people which in contrast, with a traditional survey research method, it may be more difficult to reach and collect responses from the same number of individuals.

3.2.1.1 Survey Design

The survey was designed to seek information on social technologies and exercise participation. It helped determine if health & fitness social media influencers posts did influence their decision with intentions to exercise.

In designing the questionnaire consideration was given to aligning survey topics with key objectives of the study and the practicalities of administering the survey to the target audience. In addition, the objective in designing the questionnaire was to arrive at a layout and wording that would be understandable to all potential respondents. The understanding and ease of use of the questionnaires influenced the response rate and the accuracy of the information collected. The questions were formed using words of common usage and questions were free from jargon and technical terms were also avoided. This was achieved by exploring samples of questionnaires designed by authors in similar studies and tailoring the needs to suit the target sample. It was therefore decided to use Microsoft forms as the collection tool for the survey.

In terms of content, the online survey consisted of 41 questions (see Appendix A). Included in the design were the following socio-demographic variables: gender, age, occupation, and income, which were included to facilitate comparison and analysis by key variables. A variety of simple, balanced, ordinal scales were employed to measure

various attitudes. Some sections contained a standardised, or fixed-choice set of questions to which only a fixed range of responses was possible – for instance, ‘Yes/No, or ‘tick the box’ answers. Several open-ended questions were also introduced into the survey and this provided the respondents with more opportunity to express their views in their own words and allowed for more detailed information.

The initial communication with the respondents was through email where a hyperlink was provided to complete the online survey. The survey was designed to be anonymous as the researcher felt it would encourage participants to be more honest in their answers. Permission was sought from the Registrar of the College to send the email to all staff in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (see appendix B).

3.2.2 Netnography

Toledano (2017), argues that during periods of immense and rapid change in the communication industry, methods with a tried and tested history can provide continuity and adapt to meet what is actually new. Nevertheless, he identifies benefits in adapting to newer online environments which Kozinets (2015) refers to as “digital methods, native to the digital environment”. One such emergent method is netnography.

Kozinets (2020), first recognized the potential of these convenient and data-rich online forums to provide incremental insight for commercial marketers. Indicating that in order to understand the online culture that consumers conduct themselves in, web-based ethnography is required as a means to bridge the gap between companies and their target audience. According to Kozinets, netnography is a qualitative research approach belonging to the ethnographic branch, which uses naturalistic analysis techniques (that are immersive and not intrusive) allowing the researcher to empathetically enter the (consumers’) online conversations. The netnographer is tasked with listening, comparing and understanding stories of how narratives are constructed and shared (Kozinets, 2013). It is an adaptation of ethnography, which is a very old, traditional technique in anthropology which is based on participant observation (Kozinets, 2011). The approach is an alternative to the traditional research strategies developed offline, such as face-to-face interviews.

Kozinets (2010), suggests a six-step procedure to create feasible research, where planning is vital, and context is everything. The steps are (1) research planning, (2) entrée, (3) data collection, (4) data interpretation, (5) ensuring ethical standards and (6)

research representation. Evidently, through the work of Kozinets (2013), netnography has provided researchers with an accepted approach to understanding the worlds of digital consumption and the complexity of consumer cultures. An additional advantage of netnography over ethnography is the ability for a researcher to return to the original qualitative data set at any point during the analysis phase because the data set is inherently transcribed.

Reid & Duffy (2018), argue that researchers can provide a holistic understanding of consumer behaviour through marrying large data sets curated by social media marketing (SMM) tools with netnographic techniques. Reid & Duffy believe that netnography is not limited to or by online data and can be combined with other forms of ethnographic research including depth interviews and observations. Data may be longitudinal or across a short period of time.

It is argued by Belk and Kozinets (2016), that ethnographic orientation, 'is about participant observation, no more and no less,' therefore removing the participative role of ethnographer from netnography, also removes the opportunity to experience embedded cultural understanding. Mardon et al. (2018), employed an alternative, non-participatory netnographic method, which involved the reviewing of archival data (data pre-existing online) and produced data (reflexive researcher field notes), as opposed to the data elicited through direct interaction with tribe members.

According to Kozinets (2020), three general types of data are available for collection in netnography: archival data, elicited data, and field note data. In this research project, the data collected belonged to the archival data, which was located on the Instagram Social Media accounts of the health and fitness influencers and was not a product of the researchers involvement to create or prompt the creation of data. The researcher was an unobtrusive observant on social media interactions. According to Centeno and Wang (2016) archival data provides a baseline for analysis, providing a large amount of data. Consistent with this Kozinets et al., (2014) argues that these sites contain huge volumes of data which can be challenging from a netnographic point of view. As a result, they recommend that netnographic researchers should put their research focus on keywords. An inductive approach for keywords such as motivation, inspiration, exercise and workout were recorded. However, a deductive approach was also utilised.

3.2.2.1 Netnography design

Netnographic data was drawn from observation of two health and fitness influencers Instagram accounts. Snowballing sampling method was employed to determine which health and fitness influencers to use for the netnography. Upon collecting the responses from the online survey and analyses of the answer to the question; “Which health and fitness influencers to you follow on Social Media?” two of the most popular health and fitness influencers were selected as the source to conduct the netnography; 1) The Body Coach, and 2) Trishas Transformation.

The researcher did not participate in the forum, but rather, observed and recorded relevant online discussions. An immersion journal was crucial to this process (see appendix I). The forum respondent activity was investigated for the month of March 2021. In selecting netnography as a method fit for the study, it aimed to establish a boundary of thinking about online fitness communities and culture through the observation of photographs, videos, comments and general interactions on Instagram. The researcher used their own Instagram account to follow and search the two health and fitness influencers.

This research followed Kozinets (2020), theory on the five data analysis elements required as a qualitative data analyst in netnography: collating, coding, combining, counting and charting.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis followed the established and strict netnographic research protocols, including ethics approval (see appendix C). Data analysis in this study can be divided into two processes – Online Survey and Instagram analysis, both of which were analysed using Microsoft Excel (see figure 9).

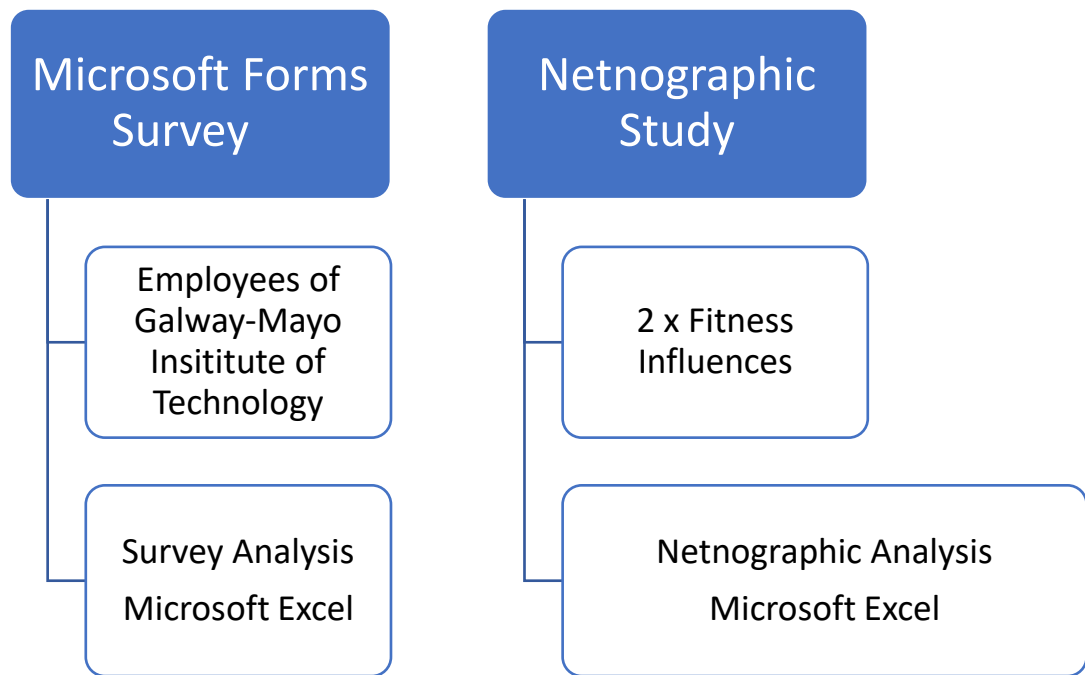


Figure 9 Mixed method of Microsoft Forms and Netnography

3.3.1 Online Survey Data Analysis

The data analysis stage answered the relevant research questions by examining and assessing the collected information to identify patterns and meanings. Data from the survey were exported from Microsoft Forms into a Microsoft Excel worksheet for tabulation, analysis, and graph presentation. According to Dewberry (2004), statistics can be divided into two areas: descriptive and inferential. Data came in the form of two different types: categorical and continuous. Categorical data involved placing the answer into a limited number of categories. An example of one such question was ‘Will you continue to participate in online fitness classes when the gyms are back open after lockdown is over?’. With continuous data, someone could have obtained a score which is higher or lower than the score obtained by someone else. An example of such a question is the use of the Likert Scale. Dewberry (2004), suggests that a Likert Scale consists of a series of written statements that express a clearly favourable, or unfavourable, attitude towards something. Respondents must indicate how much they agree or disagree with each statement. An example of a Likert question used in this research can be seen in figure 10.

Please rate the following variable on how you decide to buy/try a fitness class?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
I use time to research information about the class through search engines, websites, social media, blogs or YouTube	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I make impulse buying decisions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I listen to recommendation from family or friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I look for promotions, deals and discounts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I buy the same classes every time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I only consider free online classes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I buy classes that support my current health and fitness requirements/goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 10 Example of Likert style question used in this Research

For analysis, a data matrix was created for the categorical and continuous data which was used for counting purposes. The matrix stored information on the units of analysis, variables and values in a numerically order on a Microsoft Excel worksheet where pivot tables were used for cross tabulation. Dewberry (2004), argues that a researcher knows when they are dealing with categorical data, because the numbers simply indicate which category someone is in, and do not imply that one category is somehow greater than another.

3.3.2 Netnography analysis

Instagram was the social media channel to be investigated and within the social profile it was the ‘post’ section that were recorded and not the ‘story’. The reason behind this is that the ‘story’ only has 24 hours of exposure before it is automatically deleted, which would put the researcher under too much pressure. In addition, the ‘story’ does not measure the number of likes or comments made by followers, making it not a valid option for this research.

For this project the archival data, which was collected from the health and fitness influencers was quite vast. Which could have been quite challenging for netnographic researchers. As a result, Kozinets (2015), recommends researchers should put their research focus on keyword as the identification of these categories would be guided by the purpose of the research as expressed through the research question and objectives. For this qualitative research the focus was on two key areas; motivation and inspiration to exercise, as these areas would help answer the research question. Saunders et al. (1997) argues that one particular feature that is common to data analysis procedures, is organizing the mass of qualitative data into meaningful and related parts or categories. A snippet tool was used to take a snapshot of all posts meeting the established criteria, that is, those that were relevant to the research question, and were then pasted onto an excel workbook. The analysis process involved an indexing approach, designed to code the keywords recorded in the social media posts which identified categories of behaviour.

The inspiration of this type of indexing was sought from Kakish et al. (2018), in their qualitative analysis of body image on social media study (see table 1). This could also be considered a social media metric analysis which according to Farris et al. (2006), describes or quantifies a state.

Table 1 A Qualitative Analysis of Body Image on Social Media: Implications for Public Health Practice

Photo	ACNT	ID	# Followers	# Following	# Likes	# Comments	# Hashtags used
1		101	11,300	763	454	38	9
2		102	3,126	0	931	10	29
3		103	2,800,00	70	19,197	108	8
4		104	2,537	1,664	137	10	9
5		105	618	424	45	5	5
6		106	16,00,000	1,381	7,138	21	6
7		107	1,55,000	298	4,347	46	0
8		108	57,200	791	353	5	1
9		109	2,575	566	177	16	4
10		110	4,44,000	636	10,598	231	1

Table 1: The first data collected of Instagram photos & accounts.

Photo	ACNT	ID	# Followers	# Following	# Likes	# Comments	# Hashtags used
11		111	7,512	852	752	17	16
12		112	1,600,000	110	41,577	310	0
13		113	72,100	806	1,391	12	3
14		114	150,000	746	6,981	61	0
15		115	12,300	138	1,300	19	0
16		116	6,700	2,585	1,892	99	21
17		117	160	1,439	262	18	26
18		118	3,340	718	303	8	15
19		119	1,700,000	1,399	21,935	341	6
20		110	153,000	108	2,300	54	0

Another example is that of Marwick's (2015) research on textual and visual analysis from 2013 of forty public Instagram accounts with over ten thousand followers each. She recorded each user's name, bio, number of followers, and types of photographs posted and how frequently he or she used hashtags. Similar to research carried out by Moreilon (2015), all qualitative data sets were coded holistically with a constant comparative approach based on categories that emerged inductively from repeated close readings of the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

For this research two sets of recording workbooks were created in Microsoft Excel for each of the two health and fitness influencers. The first recording workbook included the photo and video identifier (numbered 1-20) in separate sheets. The video sheets were labelled V1, V2, V3 etc. and the photo sheets were labelled P1, P2, P3 etc. in order to maximise the number of sheets that can be viewed without having to scroll forward (see figure 11).



Figure 11 Labelling of videos and photos on Excel

Each of these worksheets contained comments with keywords posted by followers and an image of the photo or video posted by the influencer along with the hashtags. This Excel sheet was also used as an immersive journal which contained descriptions that are a combination of what is seen on the screen and what the researcher experiences. It was a place to record her own impressions, interpretations and the subjective meanings of interactions online.

The second workbook contained a table that included the following details for each photo or video posted: number of likes, number comments, hashtags, number of friends tagged and number of people who were inspired to exercise because of the influencer (see table 2). To find out the number of likes and comments both the phone app version of Instagram was utilised along with the desktop version.

This research project follows the steps discussed above for one health and fitness influencer and then repeats the same netnographic steps for the other health and fitness influencer in order to identify the typologies of fitness microblog marketing.

It should also be noted that in order to follow codes of ethics that 'Cloaking' Bruckman (2006), was implemented in that the actual names of the Influencers were provided, however, all online pseudonyms, actual names, and other means of identifying people were altered beyond recognition. The researcher engaged in a reasonable effort to subtly alter or rephrase verbatim quotes without changing their meanings so that they cannot be linked to the original post by entering the post into a search engine. the quotes provided are not edited for typographical errors, to avoid the possibility of interfering with the intended meanings of the narrators. When indexing the comments posted on the health and fitness influencers Instagram account, emojis and dates were removed as they have no significance to this research.

Table 2 Demographic analysis of health and fitness influencers Instagram posts

March	Video	Type	Likes	Comments	No. Friends Tagged	No. Hashtag	Name of Hashtags	Inspired to Exercise Online
2	1	Recipe	25,255	516	364	1	#fartypants	0
5	2	PE Promotion	26,300	1027	114	1	#pewithjoe	421
7	3	Workout	27,000	348	19	4	#fitness #thebodycoach #workout #bodycoachapp	35
8	4	Bodycoach App Promotion	8429	160	119	5	#bodycoachapp #thebodycoach #fitness #australia #newzealand	24
9	5	Bodycoach Trainer	5846	604	28	0		13
16	6	Charity	18,071	248	6	2	@nickelodeonuk #kca	0
16	7	goustocooking Ad	22,372	267	38	2	#gousto #Ad	0
19	8	Bodycoach App Promotion	40,723	983	372	0		0
21	9	Workout	18,123	397	170	4	@bodycoachapp #bodycoachapp #fitness #workout	73
22	10	Bodycoach App Promotion	8348	170	260	0		36
23	11	Bodycoach Trainer	5,764	150	16	0		8
23	12	Bodycoach Trainer	3232	74	17	0		0
23	13	Bodycoach Trainer	2900	101	11	0		0
28	14	Bodycoach App Promotion	16,094	445	185	1	#bodycoachapp	23
28	15	Bodycoach App Promotion	31,249	586	219	0		19
30	16	Bodycoach App Promotion	30,268	903	360	1	#Leanin15	17
30	17	goustocooking Ad	5,821	147	59	2	#goustogang #ad	0
31	18	Bodycoach App Promotion	6,434	452	235	7	#bodycoachapp #thebodycoach #fitness #workout #food #motivation #joewicks	
March	Pho	Type	Like	Comment	Friends tagged	Hashtags	Name of Hashtags	Inspired to Exercise Online
	2	Body Transformation	42,681	875	53	5	#transformationtuesday #thebodycoach #bodycoachapp #fitness #workout	7
	3	Food Book Promotion	35,662	389	64	2	#worldbookday #bodycoach	0
	3	PE Promotion	52,228	302	18	0		23
	3	Food Book Promotion	17,576	139	43	2	#SharpieBeardsForTheWin #Legends	0
	4	Food Book Promotion	34,487	468	72	0		0
	4	PE Promotion	411,660	749	84	1	#PEwithJoe	352
	5	PE Promotion	155,013	1868	52	0		362
	6	Bodycoach App Promotion	22,077	348	75	1	#bodycoachapp	36

Early in the study, the researcher did encounter a dilemma with methodological choices when faced with a mainly quantitative data analysis from the indexing used. However, further literature reviewed, reassured the researcher that qualitative research can indeed be quantified. Cresswell (2009), argues that concurrent strategy such where qualitative and quantitative data is gathered at the same time, researchers might quantify qualitative data which would involve creating themes and codes, then counting the number of times they occur in a text or quantifying the percentage or extent of certain topic and ideas. Kozinets (2020), concurs and further suggests that these transformations of qualitative and quantitative data into one another suggest that the operations of analysis and interpretation are often not completely separate in practice.

In order to ensure, the study was reflective of netnography and balanced the quantitative versus qualitative approach, the researcher reflected on her immersive journal (see appendix I) and provided her interpretations on the feelings and emotions behind the comments made by the influencers and followers, which sought to understand the relationship between behaviour and culture.

3.3.3 Data Representation

To present the findings of this research project effectively, textual visualisations were utilised. For example, the study adopts many word clouds to explain the rich textual data recorded from the comments on the different health and fitness influencers social media posts. The visual representation involves the format of words such as sizes, colours and fonts based on the word frequency in the textual data. In other words, the words that have high word frequencies are more prominent in the word clouds. Word clouds are a type of visual summary that can serve as a starting point for deeper analysis (Heimerl et al., 2014).

3.4 Ethics

The researcher was guided by Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology's recommendations in regard to ethics and therefore completed an ethical approval application form (see appendix G) and approval was granted in March 2021 (see appendix F). Confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were the main ethical considerations.

3.4.1 Online Survey Ethics

As with most research involving human subjects, there are ethical issues associated with the use of surveys in research. No electronic signature was requested as the survey was anonymous. No incentives were used to avoid bias and to promote voluntary participation. Participants had the right to veto access to part or all their completed survey. In addition, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they so wished.

Subjects (in this case, staff members of The Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology) were invited into the study directly by an email from the researchers work email address (see appendix D). This email clearly states they must answer ‘Yes’ after reading the consent section (see Appendix E) on the survey before they continue to answer the questions. Anyone who has indicated a ‘No’ will have their answers extracted from the overall survey.

Attached to the same email was a participant information sheet (see appendix F) detailing the study background and purpose outlining what is asked of them, the value of contribution, confidentiality and freedom of withdrawal is explained. No incentives were used as a reward for participants, to avoid bias and to promote voluntary participation.

To participate in the online survey a checklist was designed to determine eligibility (inclusion and exclusion criteria). The survey respondents must be a user of social media and fall into one or both of the following categories which will be explained in an email to them (see appendix D):

- Have participated in a face-to-face traditional exercise class
- Have participated in an online exercise class

The reasoning behind this selection process is that one of the research questions is to determine the influence or non-influence of social media in choosing a particular channel of exercise.

The researcher is aware there may be an age bias as the survey was sent to all staff in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and all staff are over the age of 18.

It could be argued that the reason for the high response rate could be attributed to the fact that the researcher works in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and therefore the staff may have felt an obligation to complete the survey.

3.4.2 Netnography Ethics

According to Kozinets (2020), significant amounts of research and literature have emerged in the past decade to enlighten our perspective on what constitutes ethical online research and ethical online versions of ethnography, including netnography. According to Kozinets (2002), netnography uses the **publicly** available information in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups and is a way to understand the discourse and interactions of people engaging in computer-mediated communication about market-oriented topics. For the purpose of this netnographic study the researcher will only be viewing public social media posts of health and fitness influencers, on their Instagram account. No private communities will be used within any online site.

Kozinets (2020), reiterates that ethical challenges in netnography are primarily on two non-trivial, contestable and related concerns. One of them is, is the online site a netnographer is studying or intend to study a private or public site? Secondly, in an online setting, what constitutes informed consent? According to Langer and Beckman (2005), ethical guidelines in netnography are too rigorous, and it further endangers the unobtrusiveness of online communication studies. A Clear consensus has not emerged in terms of these ethical questions. It remains a challenge.

Mkono (2016), argues that from an ethical and functional standpoint, netnography also lends itself to the question of authenticity of narratives, that is, are the narrators in fact, who they claim to be? There is the possibility of business representatives masquerading as ordinary contributors. It is legitimate to state however in this study that, given the scope of narratives of particular interest, engaging with the moral and ethical dilemmas of fitness, the likelihood of 'fake' participants is minimal, but not precluded. The researcher will not use a false name when following the public social media posts. Several netnographic authors are unequivocal about identify deception Kozinets (2020). Using contemporary search engines, many netnographic quotes and verbatim are easily traceable to other identifiers of a contributor to the research; this is the reason

for my stringency and as a precaution I will not be publishing direct quotes for public viewing.

There is great debate around the issue of consent in netnography. Kozinets (2020), argues that in today's world, most people know that their postings and information on social media can be read by the public and depending on the type of netnography approach consent may not be required. Kozinets suggests that there are three distinct kinds of netnographic data collection procedures (1) archival search and save, (2) the capture of your own personal notes, observations and screen captures, and (3) direct communications with people either on a public platform or through a more private medium like direct messaging or email. These three categories of data are called investigative, immersive, and interactive. The latter two categories of data collection would require written consent.

For the purpose of this research an investigative data collection method was utilised, where archival data was researched and therefore consent was not required. The researchers position on the social media platforms was as a follower. No contributions were made to the forums as the sole purpose was to collect data.

For this particular study, there will be no sensitive topics and no vulnerable populations as the topic of discussions will be around Fitness. Also, because of the public nature of the sites from which the postings will be extracted, the identities of the all subjects' comments will be appropriately anonymised, and the data securely stored on my Microsoft OneDrive account, where the folder will be password protected and so too is my computer. The flow chart in figure 12 displays the exact ethical procedures that were followed which ensures ethics is always adhered to.

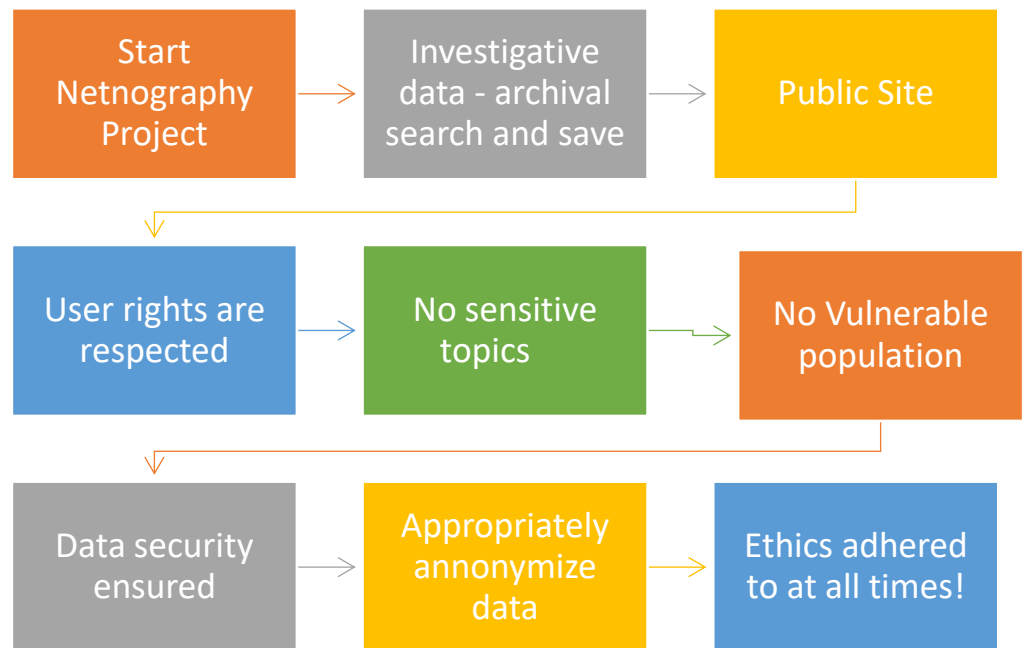


Figure 12 A research ethics process flowchart for netnography

As a researcher of qualitative inquiry, the belief exists that netnography should try to sensitively reflect a concern for the perspective of those it seeks to understand. The researcher also believes that conducting a netnography that is both ethical and effective is very important.

For both the online survey and netnography study, the researcher has a moral, legal, and ethical obligation to treat the persons behind the data with dignity and to handle their data with respect and keeping accuracy and truth always in mind. An ethics proposal form was submitted to the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology's ethics committee for approval.

3.5 Pilot Test

The pilot test, which was a trial run of the online survey was emailed and completed by 15 members of staff in The Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. This was a crucial and essential element in the empirical research as it was carried out to determine the appropriateness of the proposed questions and any difficulties could be addressed before the main survey was issued. DeLongis et al. (1992), state that pilot testing enables researchers to query participants regarding any ambiguities with question wording, sensitivity of the questions, readability of the diary booklet, or perceived relevancy of items.

For this research, the survey was pilot tested at three different stages. The first was conducted to identify any errors or ambiguity derived from the survey questions posed. The presentation of the questionnaire was then commented on with the view that its simplistic design was appropriate and suitable for its target audience. This was issued to **five** respondents. In addition, the feedback from the first five respondents addressed grammatical errors and politically correct terminology. The amended survey was then pilot tested a second time to another **five** respondents where the layout and sequencing of questions was also analysed which resulted in the elimination of some questions and the reordering of other questions with a few minor changes to the wording and terminology used. The revisions of the questionnaire helped increase the reliability and validity of the final version. The researcher also noted the length of time it took the respondents to complete the survey with an average of 10 minutes. This time span was then indicated as a guide on the final questionnaire to let participants know the length of time required to complete the whole questionnaire.

It was discovered during the feedback from the participants that the researcher had created a 'quiz' instead of a 'form' for the survey, through Microsoft Forms. When creating a survey in Microsoft Forms, it is default to create 'new quiz' and anyone who has no experience in creating forms could easily have made the mistake of creating a 'quiz' as the format is identical to a 'form' set up. Despairingly, Microsoft Forms do not have a conversion tool, despite a petition of over 1,000 signatures requesting the change. It proved to be a little disheartening for the researcher to have to start from scratch and create a new form and entering all 41 questions all over again. One of the main differences between a 'quiz' and a 'form' is that a quiz does not allow for a choice question to provide multiple answers. In addition, quiz answers can be shared with all the participants which could prove to be a huge GDPR issue. Discovering this error at the early stage of the research, signifies the importance of pilot testing. The survey was newly created in a 'form' format and issued to a further **five** people for pilot testing.

The data protection Officer in GMIT was also consulted in relation to the design of the survey as some of the questions and statements fell under the data protection category. The survey question identifying the occupation needed to be restructured. Originally a drop-down list of the various occupations was created, for example, Nurse, Administration, Management etc. However, it was felt that certain cohorts such as Nurse and Counsellor could be identified as the college only has two employees in each

of these roles. Therefore, it was decided to group them into categories in the context of those who were assumed to have more sedentary positions and those who have more physically active daily routines. Hence the new labelling of occupations fell into the following categories: Nurse or Caretaker, Administration or Counsellor etc. which makes it more improbable that someone would be identifiable from the results.

After a discussion with the GDPR Officer in GMIT it was decided to retain the survey data for a period of one year from the date of collection. The data protection Officer emphasised how important it was to delete the data after the year was complete. Therefore, a reminder was entered into the researchers google calendar to prompt deletion of all primary research data on March 20th, 2022.

3.6 Methodology Limitations

There were certain limitations discovered when using Microsoft Forms for the online survey. The Likert scaling, for example, is limited to seven choices. This was an issue as a particular question the researcher wanted to ask was ‘How many days a week do you exercise?’ This question required eight choices that is: 0,1,2,3,4,5,6 and 7. In addition, the fact that the default setting of Microsoft Forms is set to create a quiz was very confusing to anyone who is new to using this software. Not having a conversion tool from quiz to forms can be frustrating if one has made the error of designing a quiz instead of a form, as the researcher did.

The sample size was small. Due to research and time limitation, the author conducted an online survey targeting participants that are employees of just one Institute of Technology (IOT). Indeed, the results of this research cannot be generalised to represent to the wider research community as only 10% of the staff in an IOT completed the survey and is therefore not a representation of all IOTs.

Two health and fitness influencers were studied for the netnographic research and are not a representation of all health and fitness influencers. Therefore, one of the limitations with respect to this dissertation is that the results are specific to the group surveyed and cannot be generalised.

In addition, since social media is a very vast concept, the researcher had to primarily focus on the most recognisable platforms of social media as they would be most preferred in Ireland. According to Ipsos (2020), the top two sites in Ireland in 2020 were Facebook at 69% and Instagram at 48%. However, responses from the survey indicated that the most preferred social media platform was indeed Instagram, hence for the purpose of this research, Instagram was used to investigate social media marketing as part of the netnographic research. Therefore, limiting the research to just one social media platform does not give a full representation of all platforms and the differences between each.

Another limitation was in the Instagram data collection. It was discovered that only the number of likes and comments made by the followers could be viewed and not the actual shares. It would have been interesting to record how many people felt the post was worth sharing either by direct message on their own Instagram Story.

Chapter 4 Findings (Quantitative Analysis)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on a quantitative analysis of the data that was collected post survey and throughout the netnography study. The first section of the chapter will provide analysis on the survey and the latter will provide analysis on the netnographies. Overall, 103 respondents shared their views and opinions regarding social media, fitness influencers and online exercise classes. The netnography study focused on two health and fitness influencers: The Body Coach and Trishas Transformation. The researcher will only present the analysed data and does not aim to draw any conclusions or recommendations during this chapter.

4.2 Survey

The researcher utilised Microsoft Excel to draw conclusive data through tabulisation, analysis, and graphic display. The questionnaire was built using ‘Microsoft Forms’ and the results were exported into a table format in Excel. The target sample were 989 staff of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and all the participants were assured anonymity. The participants responded online via the internet.

With the total sample size of 103 respondents the survey response rate was 10%, which was calculated using the formula in figure 13.

$$\text{SURVEY RESPONSE RATE} = \frac{\text{COMPLETE SURVEY RESPONSE}}{\text{TOTAL SURVEY SENT OUT}} \times 100 = \%$$
$$103 = \frac{103}{989} \times 100 = 10.41$$

Figure 13 Calculations for response rate

4.2.1 Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics were collected including age, gender, location, occupation, and income (see table 3). Many of the participants were female (n=90, 87%) and living in County Galway (n=88, 85%). The mode age category was between 40-60 years old (n=80, 70%). Eighty-two percent of females and fifty-four percent of males aged between 40 and 60 years old and 15% of the respondents for males and females were between the age of 25-34. The majority (n=37,36%) were lecturers and (n=32, 31%) were Administration or Counsellors. The question was asked on their average yearly gross income and most (n=76, 83%) were in the range of €36,000 - €45,000 or higher.

Table 3 Survey Demographics

Survey Respondents (n=103)	%
Men (n=13)	13
Women (n=90)	87
Age	
18-14 (n=5)	5
24-39 (n=15)	14
40-60 (n=80)	70
60+ (n=3)	3
Income	
€21,000 – €25,000 (n=6)	6
€26,000 – €35,000 (n=10)	10
€36,000 – €45,000 (n=22)	21
€46,000 – €55,000 (n=19)	18
€56,000 – €65,000 (n=12)	12
€66,000 – €75,000 (n=11)	11
Greater than €76,000 (n=12)	12
Occupation	
Administration or Counsellor (n=32)	31
Engineer (n=2)	2
IT Technician/Technical Officer (n=12)	12
Lecturer (n=36)	36
Management (n=10)	10
Nurse Caretaker (n=6)	6
Cafeteria Employee or Attendant (n=1)	1
Researcher (n=1)	1
Other (n=3)	3
County	
Galway (n=88)	85
Mayo (n=13)	13
Clare (n=2)	2

4.2.1 Health and Fitness Classes

The next set of questions were devised to find out about the respondents' general health and exercise behaviour. This assessment of personal health was a subjective assessment reported by the individual. The majority at 56% were in Good Health, 26% in very good health, 15% were in fair health and 3% were in poor Health (see figure 14).

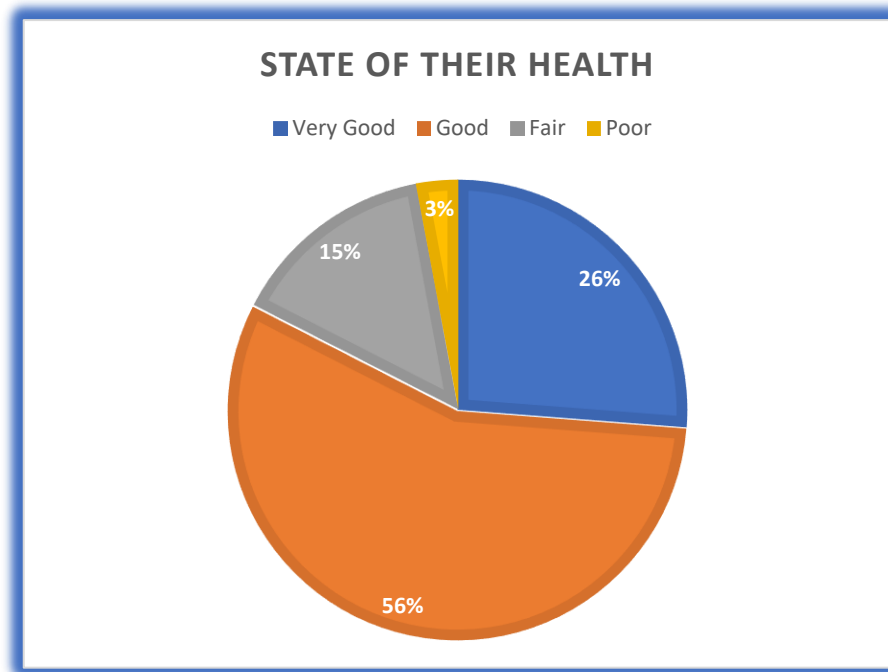


Figure 14 State of their health

The most common reason stated as the motivation for attending fitness classes, mentioned by thirty eight percent of respondents, was to lose or maintain a healthy weight. The next most significant reason provided was that they have a keen interest in keeping fit at 18%. Positive mental health and enjoying the overall feeling of exercising was 10% and 8% stated it was to lower the risk of disease and health problems (see figure 15).

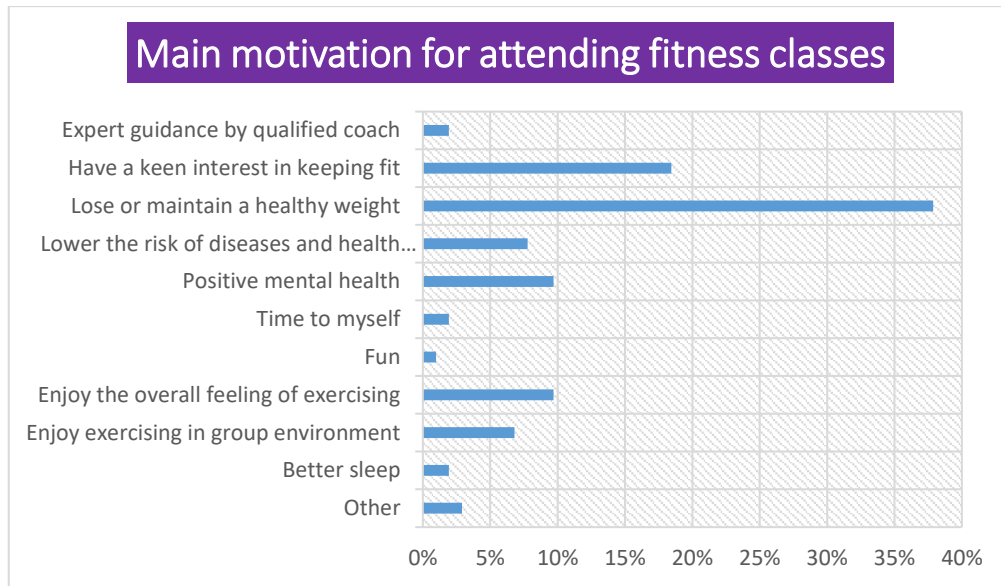


Figure 15 Main motivation for attending fitness classes

Seventy-two percent of staff have attended both online and face to face fitness classes. Twenty-one percent have only attended face to face and 7% have attended online classes only (see figure 16). Sixty percent of the respondents stated that they prefer attending face to face classes, 31% prefer both face to face fitness classes and online classes and 8% prefer only online classes (see figure 17).

Cross tabulation shows that 74% of 40 – 60 year olds have attended both online classes and face to face classes (see figure 18). More cross tabulations discover that 62% of 40-60 year olds prefer face to face classes, 66% of 25 - 39 year olds prefer face to face classes, 66% of age 60 plus prefer online classes, 60% of 18 - 24 year olds prefer both and 40% prefer face to face fitness classes (see figure 19).

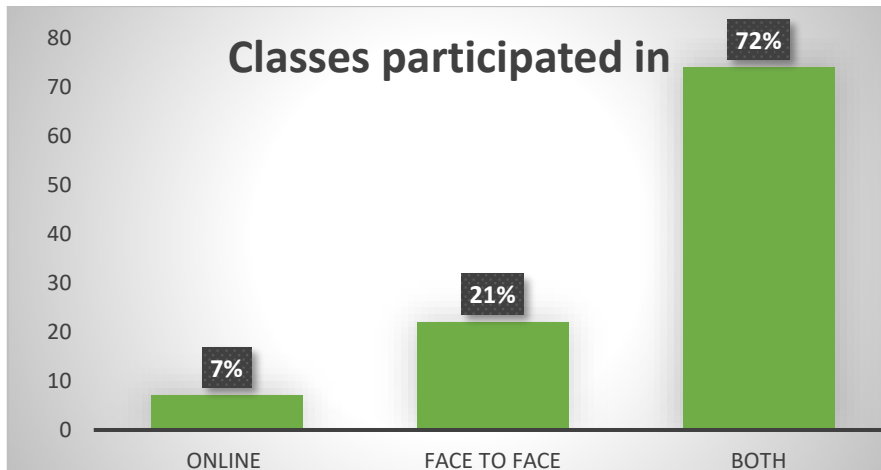


Figure 16 Classes participated in

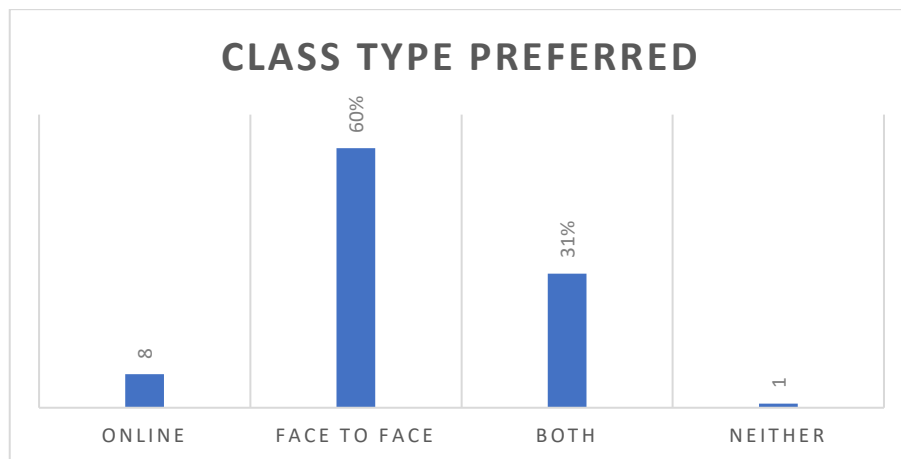


Figure 17 Class type preferred

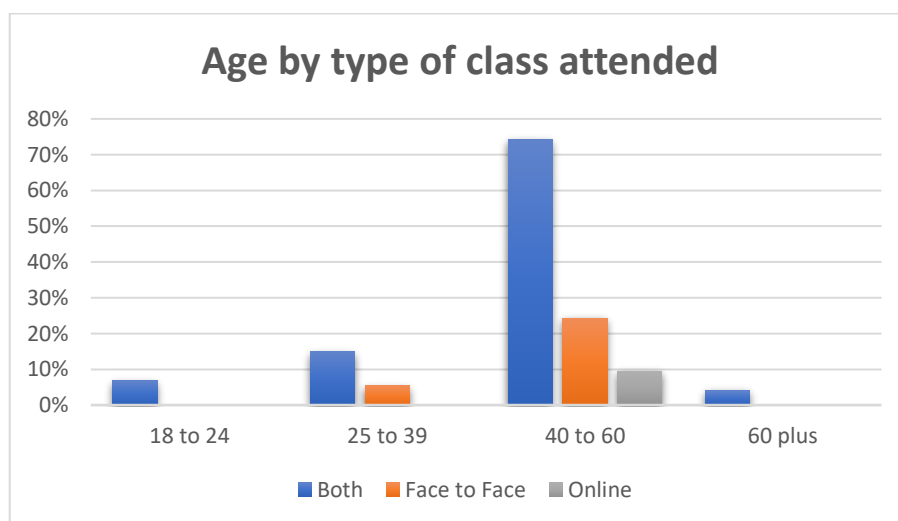


Figure 18 Age by type of class attended

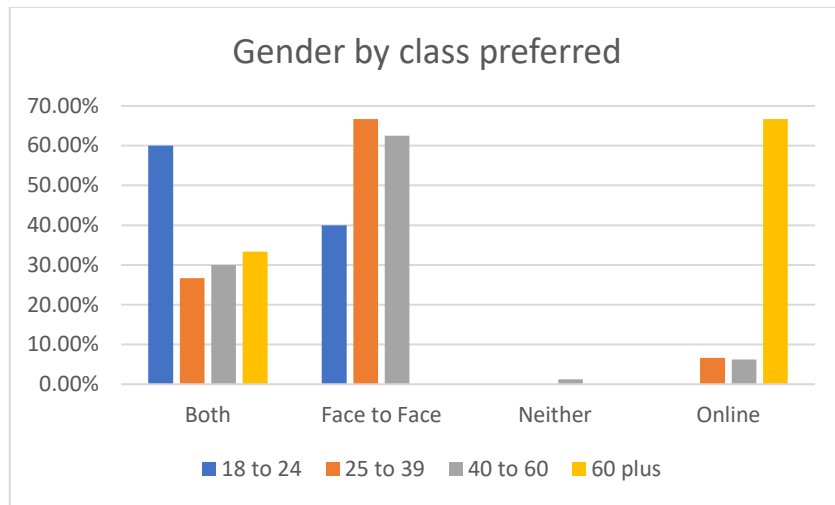


Figure 19 Gender by class preferred

Yoga is the most popular class attended each week at 39% with 90% of respondents who participating in yoga, do so by attending one or two yoga classes a week. High intensity in coming in second at 28% with 74% of respondents participating stating that they attend one or two classes per week, strength training in third with 23% of respondents availing of this type of class and 69% attending one or two classes per week (see figure 20).

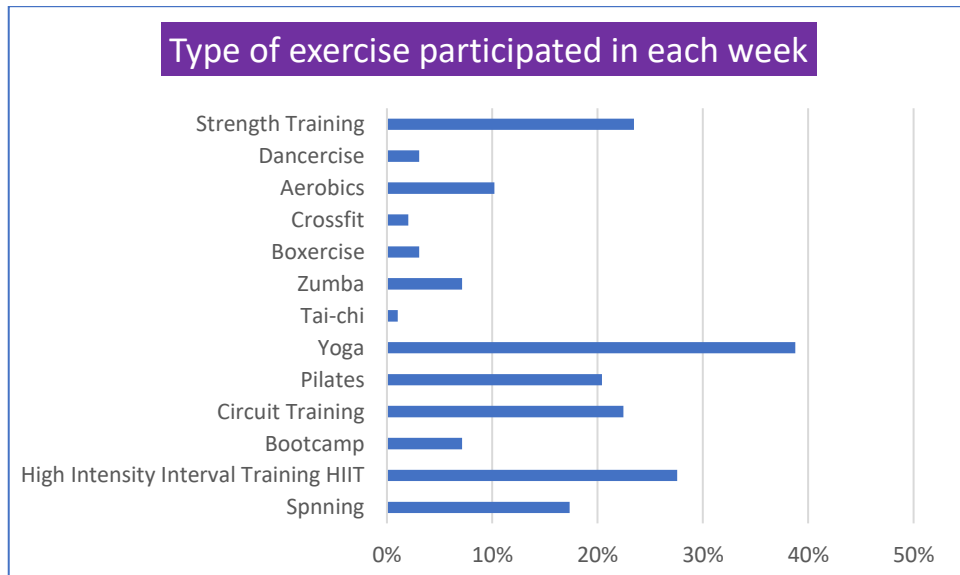


Figure 20 Exercise type

Thirteen percent of respondents did not participate in other exercise activities alongside the fitness classes (see figure 21). Fifty three percent go walking, 31% go running, 17

% swim, 9% cycle and 8% mentioned other activities such as horse-riding, boxing and GAA.

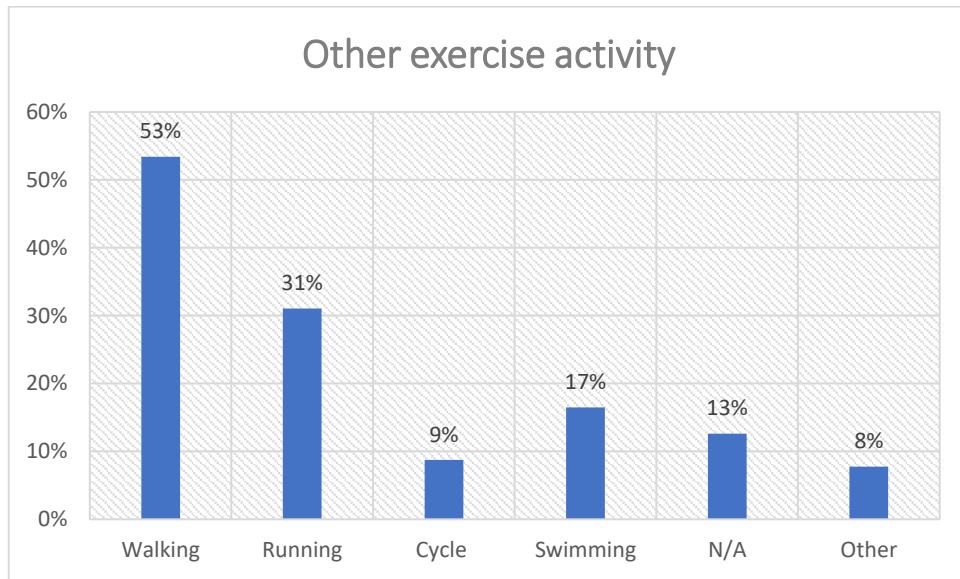


Figure 21 Other exercise activity

4.2.2 Purchase behaviour

This next section looks at the respondents purchasing decisions. They were asked what their weekly spend on fitness training is (including gym membership). Forty five percent spend <€10, 23% spend between €11 - €19, 5% spend between €20-€29, 4% spend between €30 - €39 and 5% spend between €40-€49 (see figure 22).

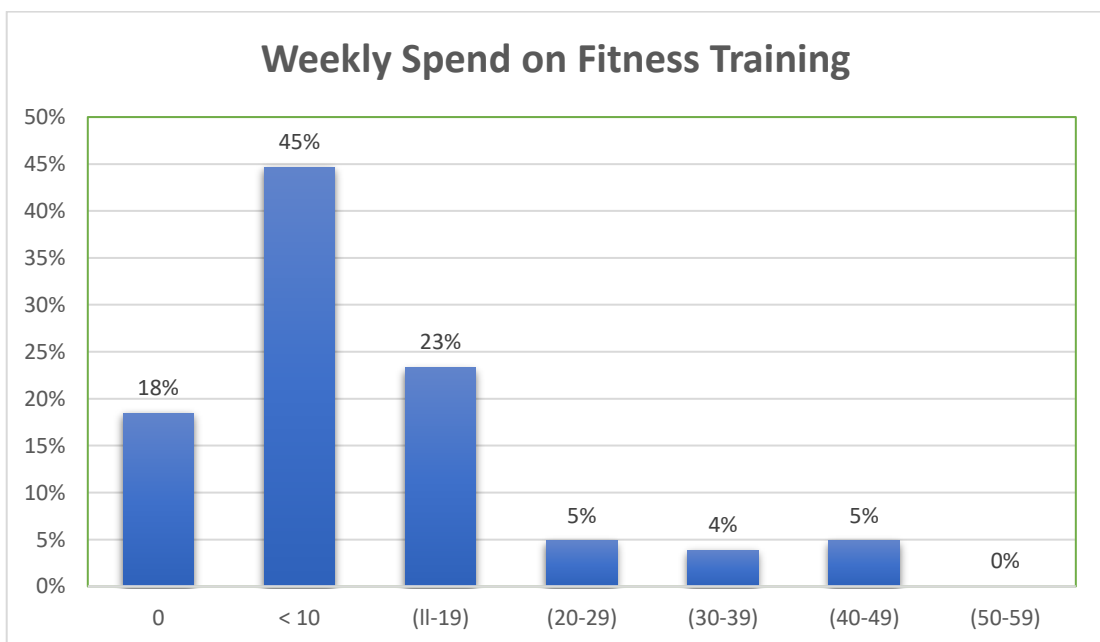


Figure 22 Weekly spend on fitness training

Another emerging theme from the surveys was how the participants heard about the current fitness class they were attending. Word of mouth through family and friends remains a popular channel of how people hear about classes at 67% and social media is in second place at 37% (see figure 23).

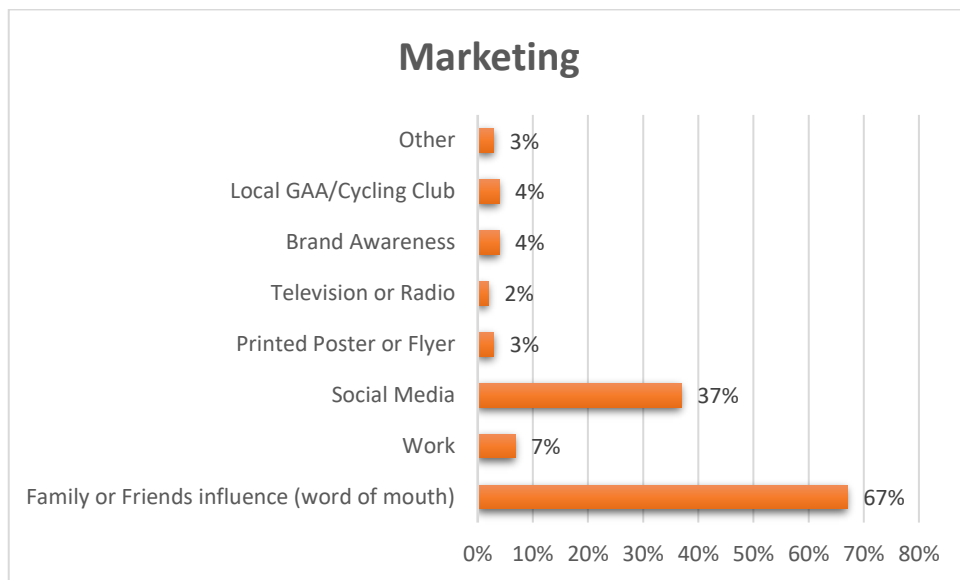


Figure 23 Marketing

Forty percent of respondents agree that they use time to research information about the fitness class through search engines, websites, social media, blogs or YouTube. Eight percent strongly agree, 20% disagree and 11% strongly disagree (see figure 24).

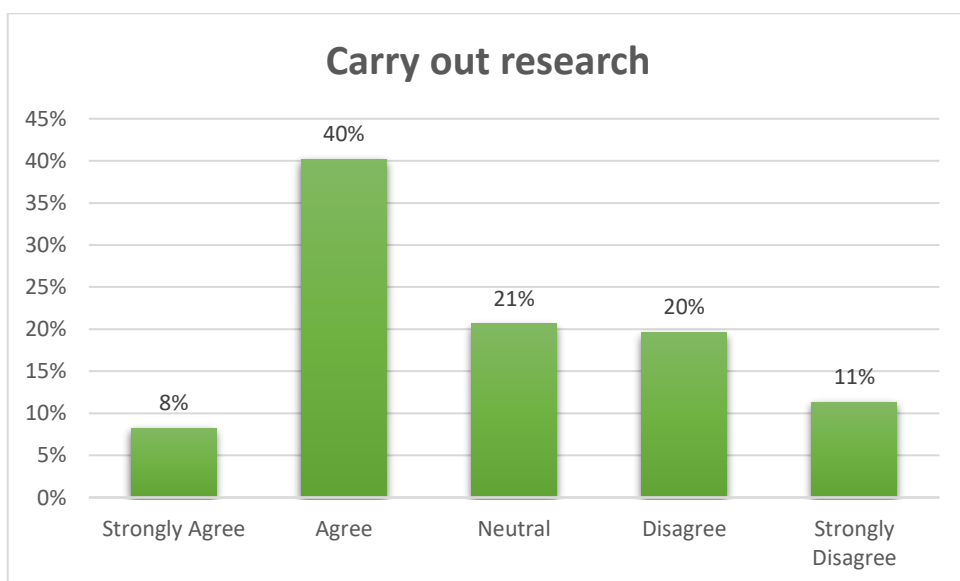


Figure 24 Research

Fifty five percent disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that they make impulse buying decisions when deciding to buy or try a fitness class and 22% agree and 3% strongly agree that they do make impulse buying decisions (see figure 25).

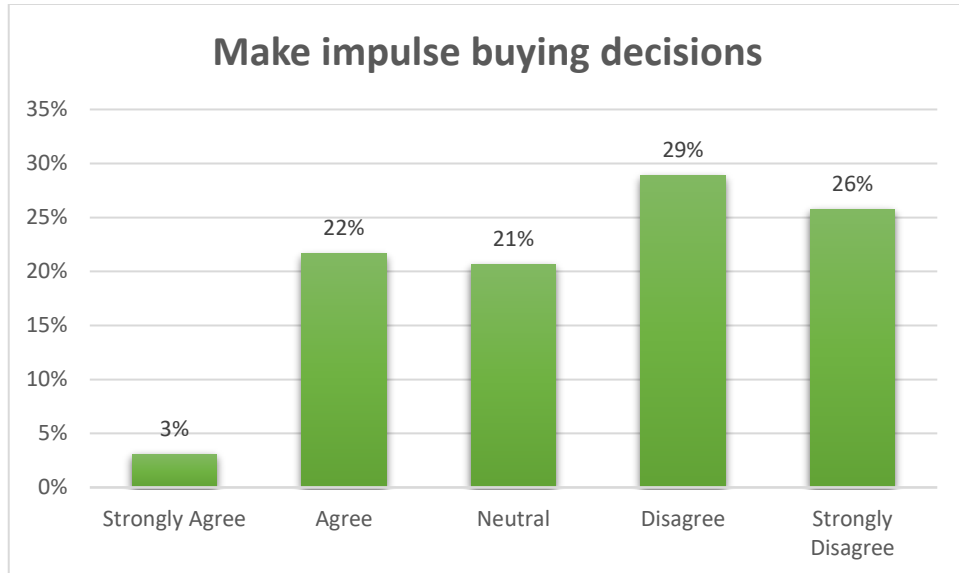


Figure 25 Impulse buying decisions

Eighty seven percent agree or strongly agree that they listen to recommendations from family or friends. Four percent disagree and 1% strongly disagree (see figure 26).

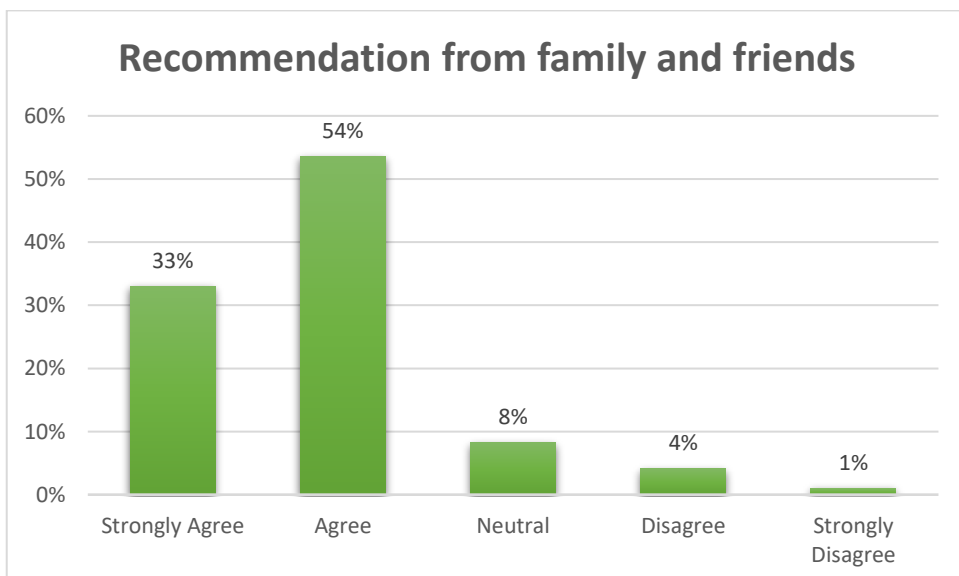


Figure 26 Recommendation

Forty four percent agree and 14% strongly agree that they seek promotions, deals and discounts when they try to buy or try a fitness class. Nine percent strongly disagree and 7% disagree with this statement (see figure 27).

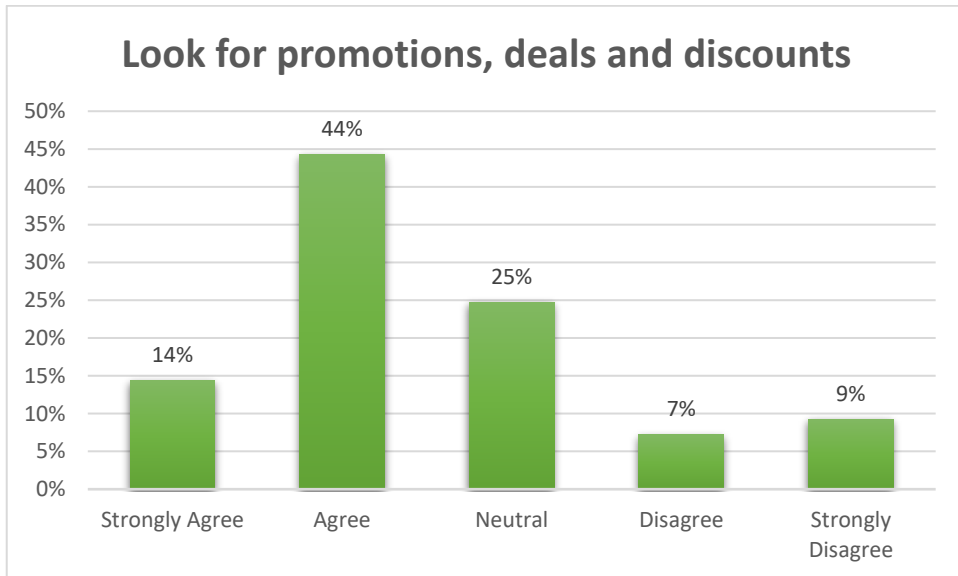


Figure 27 Promotions, deals and discounts

Respondents were asked if they would only consider free online classes when deciding to buy or try a class and 43% disagreed, 27% strongly disagreed, 14% agreed and 5% strongly agreed with this statement (see figure 28).

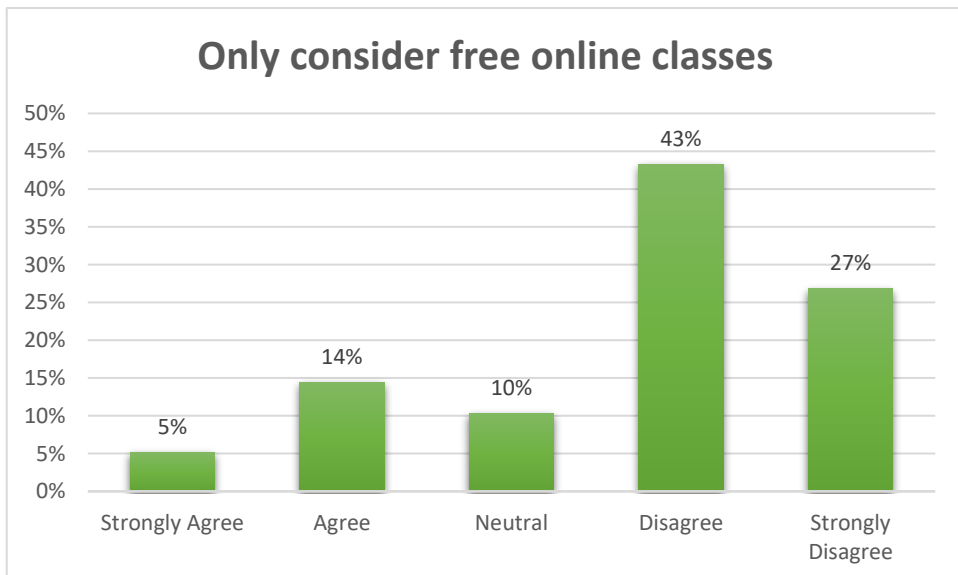


Figure 28 Free online classes

Fifty-seven percent of respondents agreed and 24% strongly agreed that they selected classes that support their current health and fitness requirements (see figure 29).

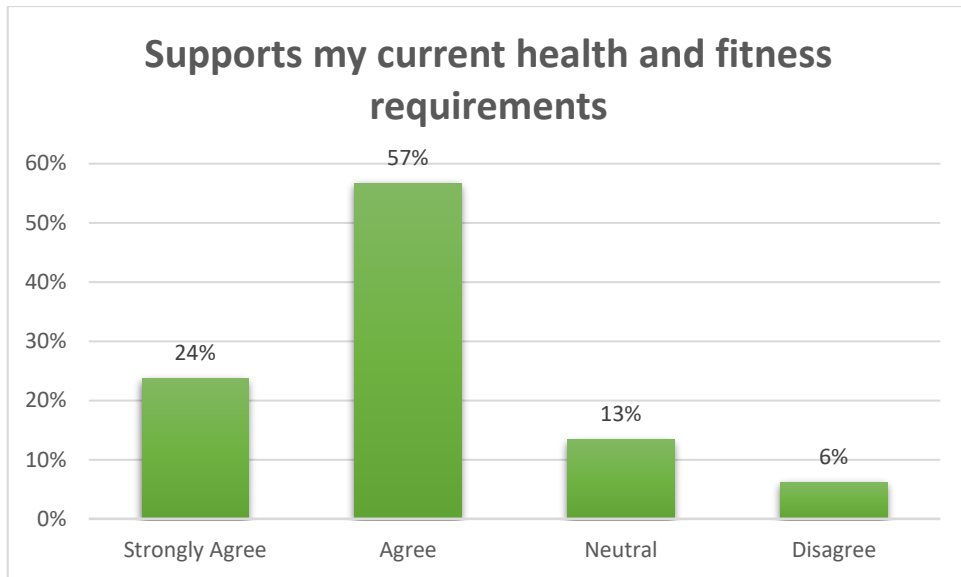


Figure 29 Supports current health & fitness requirements

Thirty three percent of the respondents agree and 6% strongly agree that they repeat buy the same class every time. Twenty five percent disagree and 7% strongly disagree with this statement (see figure 30).

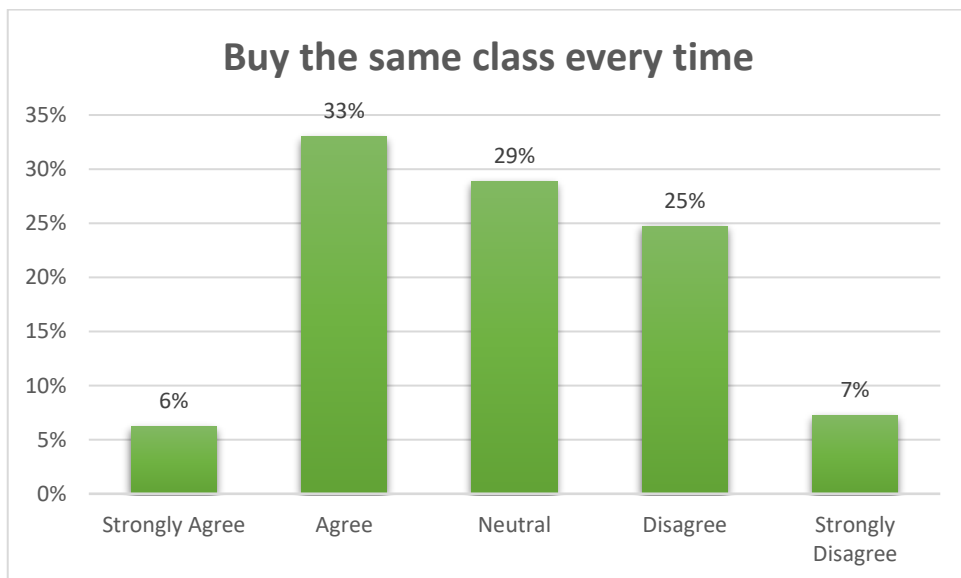


Figure 30 Purchase same class

4.2.3 Online fitness classes

This next section analyses those respondents who have participated in online exercise classes. For those respondents who have never participated in an online fitness class the reasons given were work and family commitments, time does not suit, prefer face to face or prefer social interaction. Seventy nine percent of respondents have

participated in online fitness classes in the past and 64% were doing the online fitness class now because the gyms are closed due to Covid.

Thirty-seven percent said they will continue with online classes when gyms are back open. Nineteen percent said maybe and 13% said no (see figure 31).

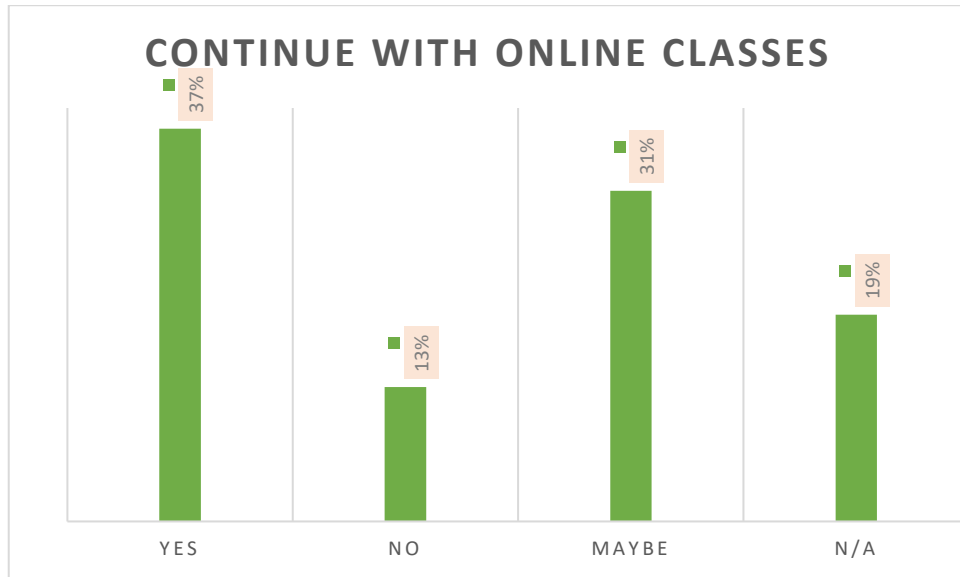


Figure 31 Online classes

Forty-two percent of those who stated they only used online classes due to lockdown said they will continue to use online classes after lockdown is lifted and 39% said maybe. Fifty percent of those who said they use online classes not due to lockdown said they would continue to use online classes.

Sixty-six percent of respondents stated that they access their online fitness classes through Zoom, 21% use Facebook live and 13% use Instagram live (see figure 32).

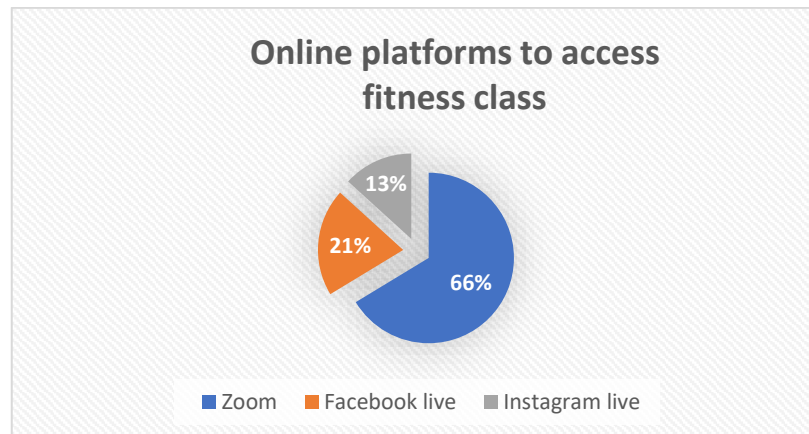


Figure 32 Online platforms

Respondents were asked to describe their expectations and perceptions they felt prior to their first online class and 82% responded to the question. Text analysis was carried out and the prominent themes arising from this answer were feeling of negativity: apprehensive, worried, unsure, less motivating, and self-conscious (see figure 33).



Figure 33 Negative perceptions and expectations

Seventy seven percent stated that the actual experience of the online class matched their expectations in a positive way. The respondents were then asked to describe their experience of the online group fitness class and how they felt. With the prominent key theme been positive, other key words used were good, motivated, happy, loved it, ok, inclusive, enjoyed it and great (see figure 34).



Figure 34 Positive experience

Sixty five percent of respondents have stated that they attend 1-2 fitness classes per week, 21% attend 3-4 classes, 11% attend 5-6 classes and 2% attend 7 or more classes (see figure 35).

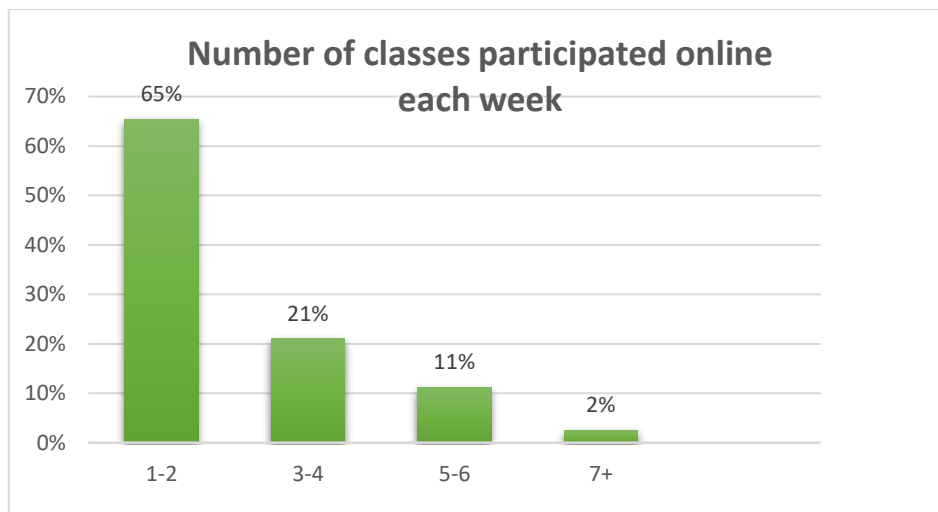


Figure 35 Classes participated in

Eighty-one percent expect to pay less than €10 per online fitness class, 44% expect to pay between €0-€5 and 37% expect to pay between €6-€10 (see figure 36). Eighty-six

percent believe that online classes should be cheaper than face to face classes and 68% believe online classes were good value for money.

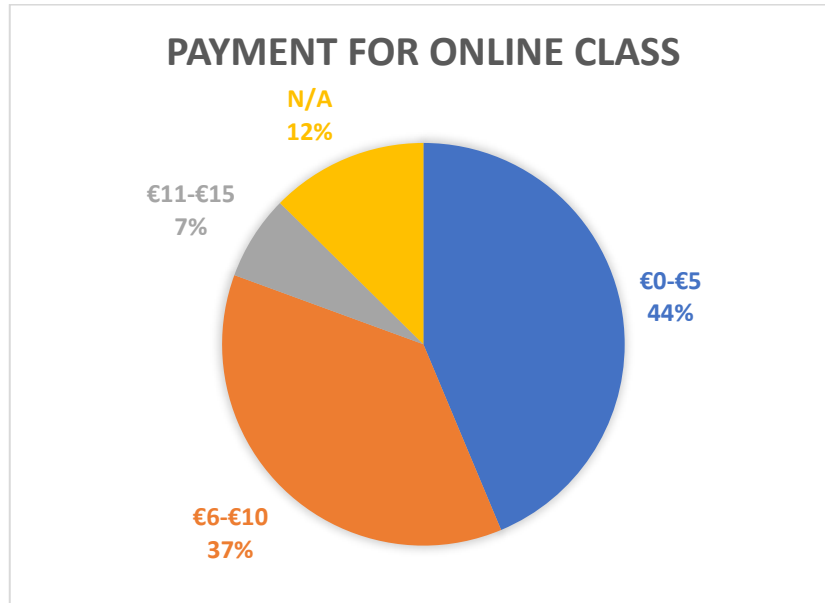


Figure 36 Payment

Cross tabulations tell us that 53% of those who earn between 46,000 and 55,000 state that they would expect to pay less than €10 per online class. Forty-percent of those who earn between 26,000 and 35,000 expect to pay less than €10 (see figure 37). Forty percent of those who would pay <10 work in Administration or are counsellors and 15% work as Technical Officers.

Respondents were asked what they thought were the main advantages for online fitness classes and key words identified were: no travel required, no childcare needed, can be done at home, can be done at a time that suits, commitment and motivation (see figure 44).



Figure 37 Advantages for online classes

In contrast 64% of respondents believe there were disadvantages to online fitness classes and the key theme coming across was that it is less social (see figure 38).



Figure 38 Disadvantages to online fitness classes

The respondents suggested the main improvement to online classes would be to record the class so that it can be viewed at a time that suits the participants (see figure 39). Some respondents stated if the camera were mandatory to be switched on then it would better motivate them to do the exercises accordingly. In contrast, some respondents

felt that having the cameras switched on made them feel self-conscious and felt it would be a deterrent from participating if they were forced to switch it on.



Figure 39 Suggested improvements to online classes

4.2.4 Social Media Usage

This next set of questions were devised to find out the usage of social media by respondents and its influence on their decision making. Firstly, it is important to note that all participants are active on a variety of social media platforms. Instagram was the most preferred social media platform with 29% of respondents stating it is their favourite (see figure 40) and 34% of that number said they use it very frequently (see figure 41).

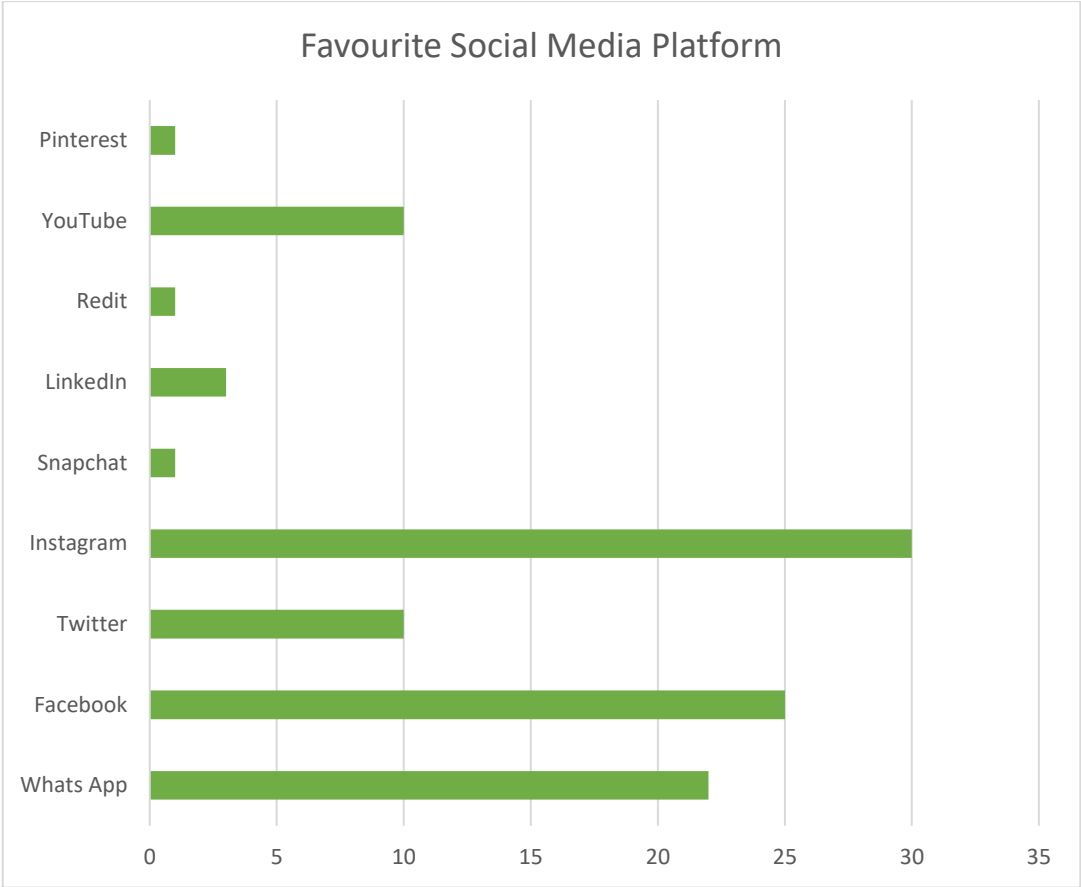


Figure 40 Favourite Social Media Platform

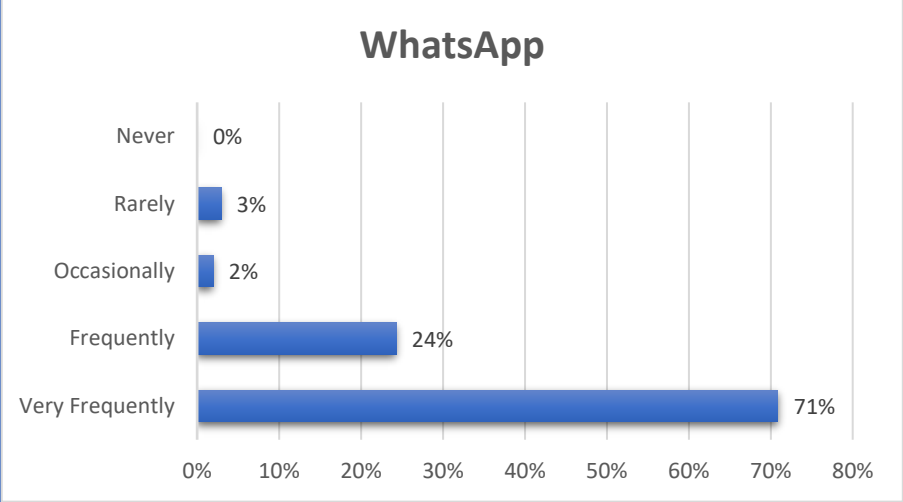
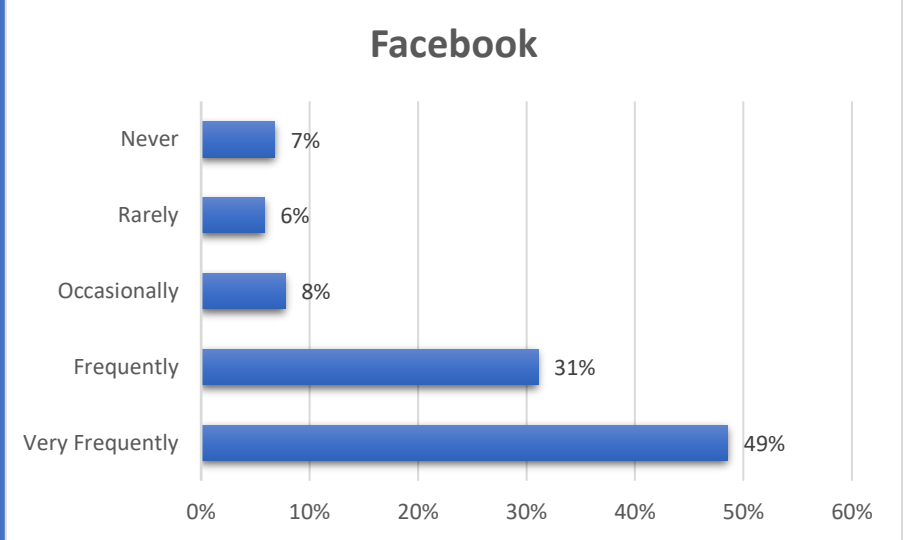
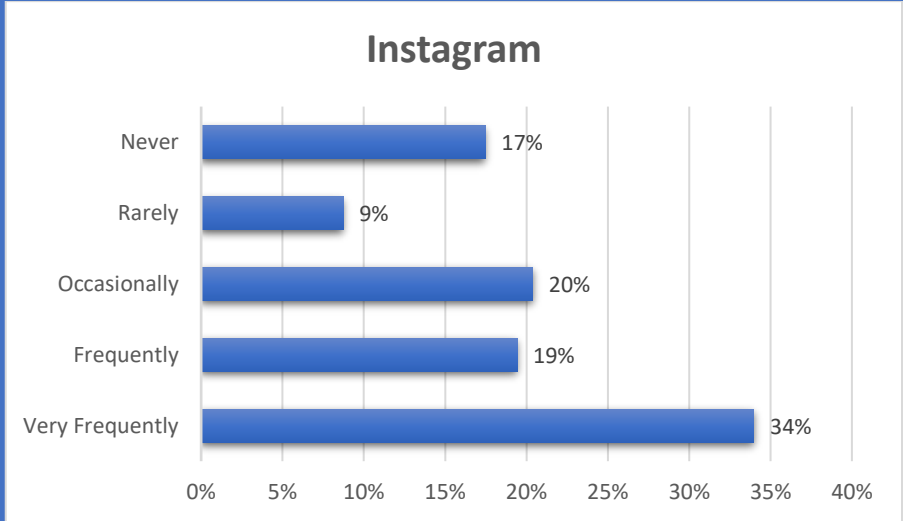


Figure 41 Use of Social Media

The main reason for using social media was to stay in touch with family and friends at 68% and 56% stated it was for staying up-to-date with what is happening, 28% use it for fun and entertainment, 23% use it to share photos or videos, 20% use it to fill spare time, 19% use it for general networking and 14% use it to research new products (see figure 42).

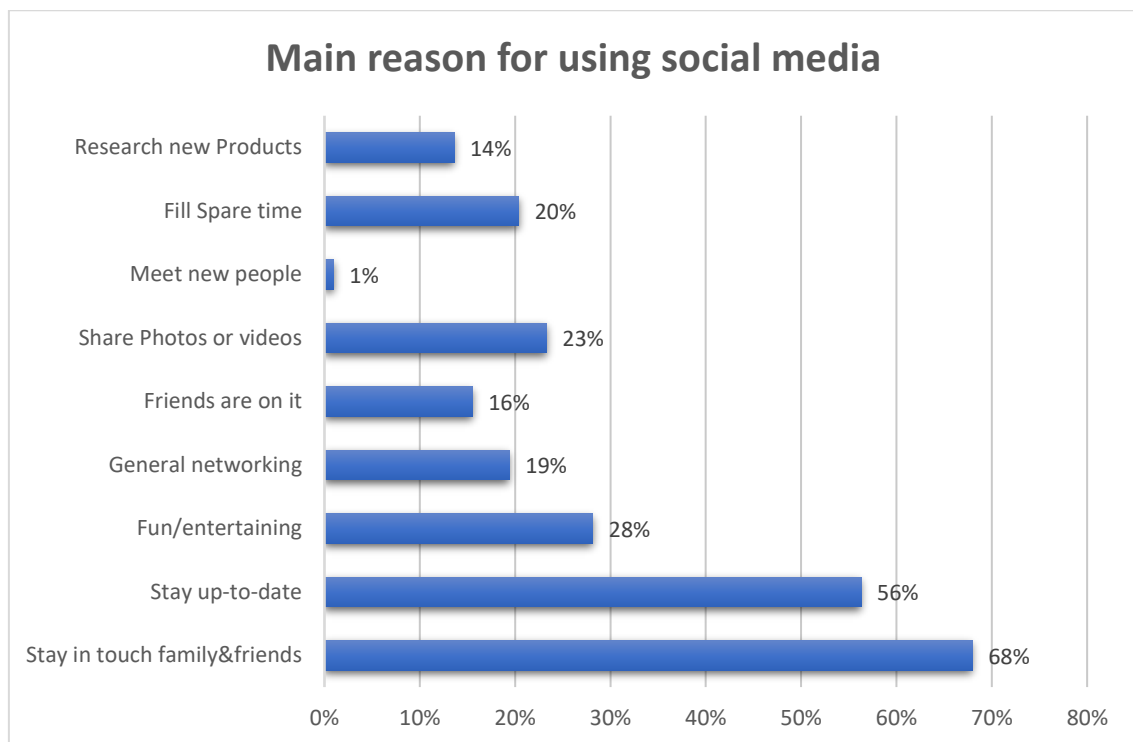


Figure 42 Main reason for using social media

Another interesting finding was how often the participants used social media channels. When asked how long they spend on social media, all participants specified that they use it daily with the majority at 41% using it for 1-2 hours per day (see figure 43).

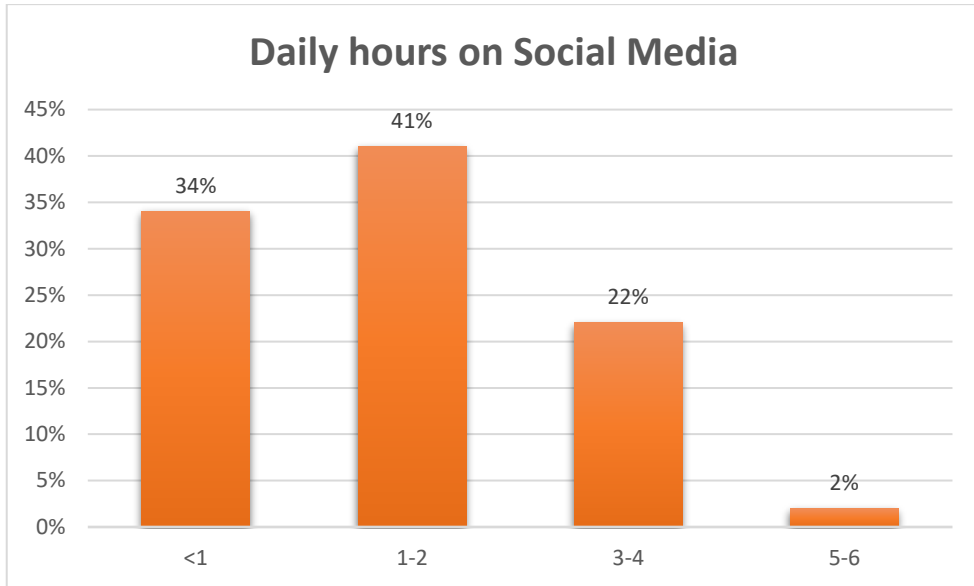


Figure 43 Time on Social Media

Forty-eight percent do not follow any fitness influencers, thirty four percent follow both male and female influencers, 14% follow female only and 4% follow male only (see figure 54).

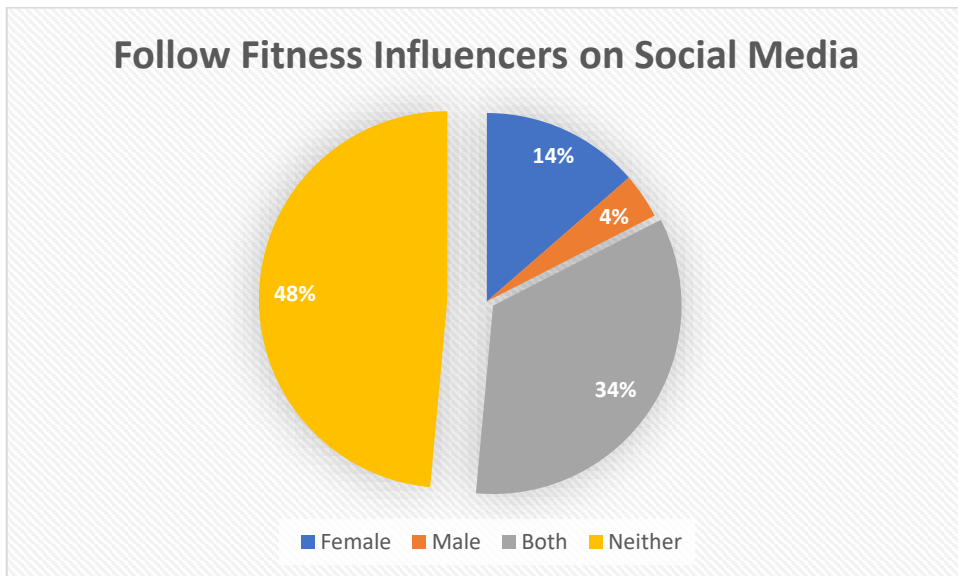


Figure 44 Follow Fitness Influencers

Forty-nine percent never interact with fitness influencers through social media. Only 10% interact with them frequently and 16% occasionally (see figure 45).

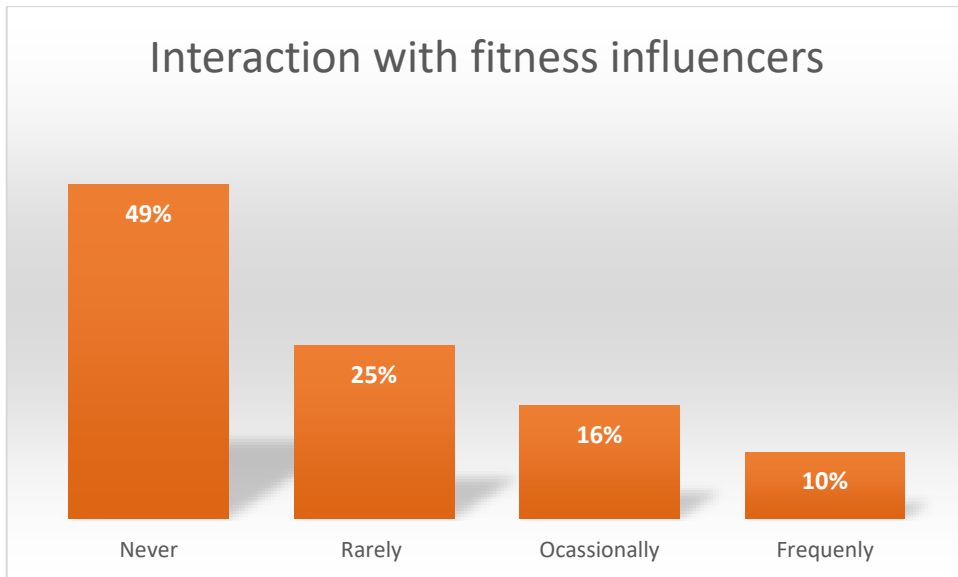


Figure 45 Interaction with Fitness Influencers

A post shared by a fitness influencer would make 55% of respondents do nothing. However, it is very clear that a post by a fitness influencer has made 25% of the respondents try out a class online and 14% would recommend the post to a friend (see figure 46).

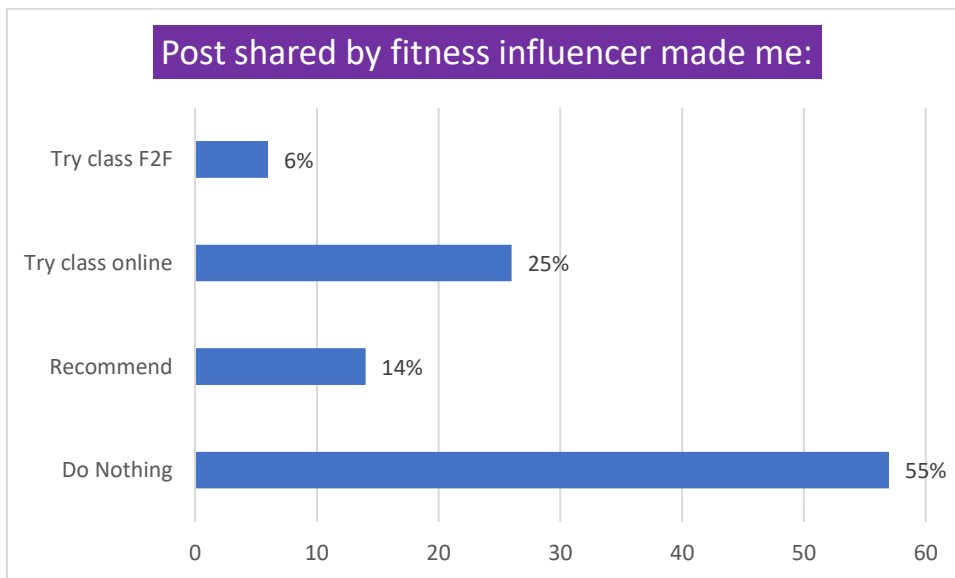


Figure 46 Posts shared by influencers

Forty-eight percent are not likely to share a post related to health and fitness with a friend or colleague. However, 26% are likely to share the post (see figure 47).

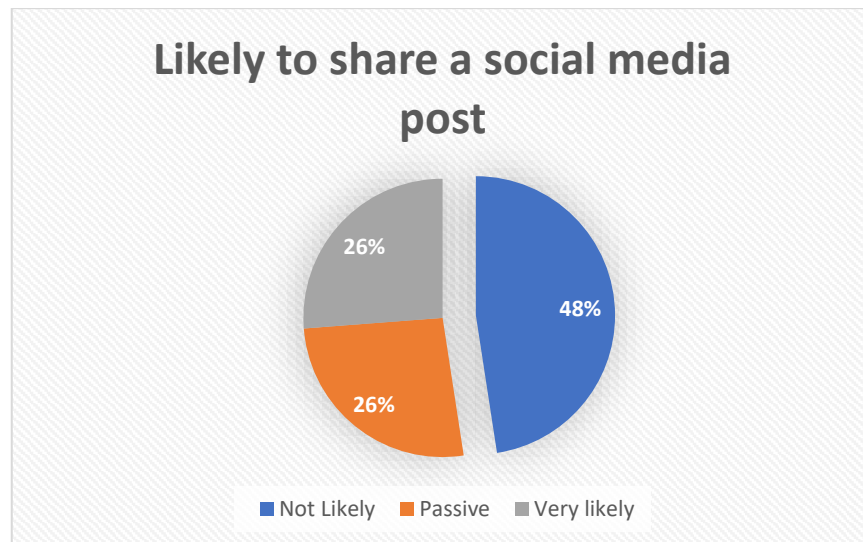


Figure 47 Likely to share a post

Another notable finding is that 40% of respondents said they are more likely to trust a fitness brand if they knew they were engaging with their fans or followers on social media.

4.3 Netnography

This next part of the chapter will focus on the netnography findings. A variety of important findings were generated by this netnographic approach. The conceptual framework for netnography was presented by Kozinets (2010) who argues that netnography is a qualitative research approach belonging to the ethnographic branch, which uses a naturalistic analysis technique (that are immersive and not intrusive) allowing the researcher to empathetically enter the (consumers) online conversations. The netnographer is tasked with listening, comparing and understanding stories of how narratives are constructed and shared.

This study evaluated the Instagram news feed posts from two different health and fitness influencers over the period of four weeks (March 2021). For this section, the photographs and videos were analysed until the researcher reached theoretical saturation and the social media metrics were displayed similar to qualitative research carried out by Kakish et al. (2018).

Microsoft Excel was used as the tool for data analysis. Every post to the Instagram feed consisted of either a video or a photo. The data captured was input into a summary table on excel, which consisted of two sections similar to the type of indexing from Kakish et al. (2018). The first stored data on videos posted and the second stored data on photographs posted. The data recorded the type of post, that is, whether it was a recipe, workout, promotion, body transformation, inspiring, motivation, or trivia. In addition, the table also captured the number of likes, number of comments, number of friends tagged, number of hashtags, name of hashtags and number of people that were inspired to exercise because of it. To begin the netnography analysis, a background on each of the health and fitness influencers is provided. Any spam posts identified were excluded in the analysis of this research. Spam consists of posts on Internet forums that contains related or unrelated advertisements, links to malicious websites, trolling, and abusive or otherwise unwanted information.

During the data analysis, data obtained from online observation was straight copies of the online messages or postings and was kept as its original format. However, for the purpose of analysis, emojis were not included.

4.3.1 The Body Coach

Joe Wicks is the man behind the Body Coach, and he is a qualified personal trainer living in England. He started his journey handing out flyers at his local train station, trying to get customers for his bootcamps in a park. He discovered Instagram as a tool for self-promotion in 2014, and his feed is a conveyor belt of 15-second recipe videos, before and after client photos and pictures of him in his pants (Heritage, no date). Ten years and 600,000 clients later he is now one of the top Fitness Influencers in the Industry with 4.1 million Instagram followers (see table 4) and 4 million books sold (Wicks, 2020). He also holds the Guinness world record for the largest live streamed fitness class ever when 950,185 people took part at the same time for a workout. His followers are from both the passion and trigger event community. People join because it addresses things that speak to their deep needs and ideals. They look to engage and interact with like-minded individuals, as well as hearing new information around this topic. Conversely, many are triggered by an event, such as the want to lose weight,

and get healthier as they have a special occasion and are bound in a certain point in time.

Table 4 Body Coach Instagram Audience

Following	Followers
2926	4.1 Million

4.3.1.1 The Body Coach Netnography Findings

Over the period of four weeks (31 days), the Body Coach posted 18 videos and 32 photos on his Instagram Feed. The total video posts amounted to a total of 302, 229 likes and photos amounted to 1,581,544 likes. The average follower engagement per video or photograph on Instagram was 1%. This average was derived from the sum of likes and comments received by influencers' posts for 31 days divided by their follower count. To determine the follower engagement, the following formula was used:

$$\text{Engagement Rate} = \frac{\text{Likes} + \text{Comments}}{\text{Total Number of Followers}}$$

4.3.1.1.1 Body Coach Video Posts

The most frequent type of video posted was of 'cooking demonstrations', with five videos posted in a four-week period and one of these videos received 40,723 likes, scoring the most likes out of all the videos he posted (see table 5). In fact, the top three video posts with the most likes and comments were all cooking demos. It was one of these cooking videos that scored the greatest number of friends tagged in any one post (n=364). The cooking demos were of recipes to promote his new Body Coach App. It was discovered that the Body Coach has another Instagram page solely for promotion of his Body Coach App, where he has 81,200 followers.

Table 5 Summary Table of video posts

March	Video	Type	Likes	Comments	Friends Tagged	#	Name of Hashtags	Motivated/ Inspired	Follower Engagement	Follower Engagement
19	8	Cooking Demo	40,723	983	320	0		54	1%	41,706
28	15	Cooking Demo	31,249	586	219	0		19	1%	31,835
30	16	Cooking Demo	30,268	903	316	1	#Leanin15	17	1%	31,171
7	3	Workout	27,000	348	19	4	#fitness #thebodycoach #workout #bodycoachapp	35	1%	27,348
5	2	PE Promotion	26,300	1027	114	1	#pewithjoe	421	1%	27,327
2	1	Cooking Demo	25,255	516	364	1	#fartypants	0	1%	25,771
16	7	Goustocooking Ad	22,372	267	38	2	#gousto #Ad	0	1%	22,639
21	9	Workout	18,123	397	170	4	@bodycoachapp #bodycoachapp #fitness #workout	73	1%	18,520
16	6	Charity	18,071	248	6	2	@nickelodeonuk #k.ca	0	1%	18,319
28	14	Cooking Demo	16,094	445	185	1	#bodycoachapp	23	1%	16,539
8	4	Body Coach App Promotion	8429	160	119	5	#bodycoachapp #thebodycoach #fitness #australia #newzealand	24	1%	8,589
22	10	Body Coach App Promotion	8348	170	260	0		36	1%	8,518
31	18	Body Coach App Promotion	6,434	452	235	7	#bodycoachapp #thebodycoach #fitness #workout #food #motivation #joewicks	15	1%	6,886
9	5	Body Coach Trainer	5846	604	28	0		13	1%	6,450
30	17	Goustocooking Ad	5,821	147	59	2	#goustogang #ad	0	1%	5,968
23	11	Body Coach Trainer	5,764	150	16	0		8	1%	5,914
23	12	Body Coach Trainer	3232	74	17	0		0	1%	3,306
23	13	Body Coach Trainer	2900	101	11	0		0	1%	3,001

There were two ‘workout’ videos with the first workout posted on day 7, scoring the fourth highest ranking of likes at 27000 and the second posted on day 21, scoring in eight position at 18,123. Workouts proved very popular in the motivation category, coming in second place with 73 people stating they were motivated to exercise because of the Body Coach, after watching the first workout video and 35 stated they were motivated after watching the second video. Both posts included the tag of @bodycoachapp and #bodycoachapp.

The most frequently used hashtag over the four-week period was #bodycoachapp (see figure 48). In second place was #fitness and in joint third place was #Thebodycoach and #workout. Hashtags used once can be seen in figure 49.

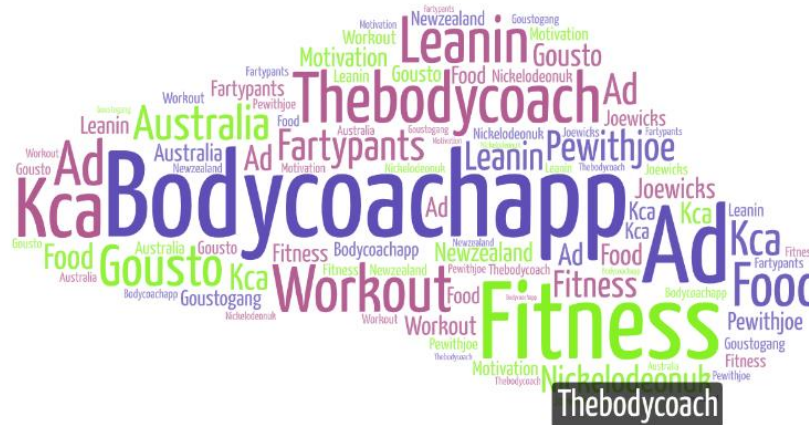


Figure 48 Most frequent used hashtags



Figure 49 Hashtags only used once

The post that scored the highest amounts of comments of motivation was ‘PE Promotion’. With 421 people giving positive feedback, thanking Joe for motivating

them to exercise throughout lockdown. PE with Joe began on Monday 23rd March 2020, in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the UK lockdown. When it was announced that all schools would be closed, he wanted to help the children stay healthy and positive. He hosted a free workout aimed at kids and families on his YouTube channel, live every Monday – Friday while the schools were closed. Since the onset he completed more than 70 workouts and had over 70 million views around the world and raised £500,000 for charity.

Joe Wicks is looking for three fitness coaches who will help him on his mission to get the world fitter, happier and healthier. In the four-week period he posted four videos of the new ‘Body Coach Trainers’ and three of these posts scored the least amount of likes and comments in this period. In total, 738 people commented on the video posts, stating they were either motivated or inspired by him.

There were two advertisements of another company: ‘Gustocooking’. One receiving 22,372 likes, 267 comments, 38 friends tagged, and zero comments of people motivated. The second ‘Gustocooking’ advert received 5,821 likes, 147 comments, 59 friends tagged and again zero people motivated. Both advertisements did have two hashtags attached: #goustogang and #ad. The charity video posted on day 16 received 18,071 likes and it had the least number of friends tagged with just a mere six. In addition, video posts on charity work, advertisements and Body Coach Trainers all received zero comments of motivation from his followers.

4.1.1.1.2 Bodycoach Photograph Posts

Food Book Promotion was the most frequent type of photograph posted with 7 posts over the four-week period. The remaining breakdown of types of photos from highest to low were as follows; 4 body transformation, 4 posts on Body Coach App, 4 PE promotion, 3 motivational, 1 charity, 1 family, 1 trivia quiz and 1 workout (see table 6). The post on PE promotion had the highest score of 411,660 likes. In fact, the top three posts with the highest number of likes were all PE promotion posts. The least number of likes was for the Body Coach App promotion at 4946.

Table 6 Summary of photograph posts

Type	Likes	Comments	Friends tagged	#	Name of Hashtags	Motivated/ Inspired	Follower Engagement
Trivia	24,880	8994	N/A	0		0	1%
Body Coach App Promotion	42,681	875	53	5	#transformationtuesday #thebodycoach #bodycoachapp #fitness #workout	7	1%
PE Promotion	52,228	302	18	0		23	1%
Food Book Promotion	35,662	389	64	2	#worldbookday #bodycoach	0	1%
Food Book Promotion	17,576	139	43	2	#SharpieBeardsForTheWin #Legends	0	0%
PE Promotion	411,660	749	84	1	#PEWithJoe	352	10%
Food Book Promotion	34,487	468	72	0		0	1%
PE Promotion	155,013	1868	52	0		962	4%
Body Coach App Promotion	22,077	348	75	1	#bodycoachapp	36	1%
Food Book Promotion	21,324	426	236	4	#leanin15 #thebodycoach #food #recipes	0	1%
Food Book Promotion	69,481	787	370	0		0	2%
Food Book Promotion	35,777	1031	624	0		0	1%
Food Book Promotion	40,882	233	62	3	#bodycoachapp #foodie #food	0	1%
Body Coach App Promotion	67,854	1472	35	6	#thebodycoach #fitness #bodycoachapp #workout #transformationtuesday	18	2%
Charity	29,172	211	0	1	#motivation	0	1%
Body Coach App Promotion	21,122	714	0	0	#nickelodeon	42	1%
Food Book Promotion	21,679	236	64	0		0	1%
Body Transformation	10,131	92	15	6	#fitness #workout #thebodycoach #bodycoachapp #inspiration	46	0%
Food Book Promotion	22,166	292	53	3	#transformationtuesday	0	1%
Workout Link	9503	259	36	0	#breakfast #food #thebodycoach	75	0%
Family	76,366	318	6	0		0	2%
Body Transformation	20,819	383	14	0		34	1%
Motivation	48,330	378	34	0		0	1%
PE Promotion	129,735	1010	156	1	#pewithjoe	623	3%
Body Coach App Promotion	13,077	182	32	7	#foodie #thebodycoach #bodycoachapp	16	0%
Motivation	42,056	436	213	0		0	1%
Food Book Promotion	12,856	183	18	0		0	0%
Body Coach App Promotion	19,641	319	52	0		8	0%
Body Coach App Promotion	4946	203	32	0		6	0%
Motivation	31,601	482	64	0		0	1%
Body Transformation	11,828	204	12	4	#bodycoachapp #thebodycoach #fitness #workout #motivation	55	0%
Body Transformation	24934	361	8	0		5	1%

The two most frequently used hashtags in photograph posts over the four-week period were #Thebodycoach and #Bodycoach app (see figure 50). In second place was #fitness and #workout. Other hashtags used more than once were #transformationtuesday #motivation #food #Pewithjoe and #Foodie. Hashtags that were used only once are displayed in figure 51. The body transformation photos had the greatest number of hashtags.



Figure 50 Hashtags only used once



Figure 51 Hashtags only used once

It was the ‘trivia quiz’ post, where Joe asked his followers to answer a question “What’s the perfect toast?” (see figure 52) that scored the highest number of comments at 8994 and a Body transformation photograph had the least number of comments at 92. Food

book promotion had the most tagging of friends at 624, however, these same posts had zero statements of motivation to exercise. Trivia, Body transformation and charity photograph had zero friends tagged.

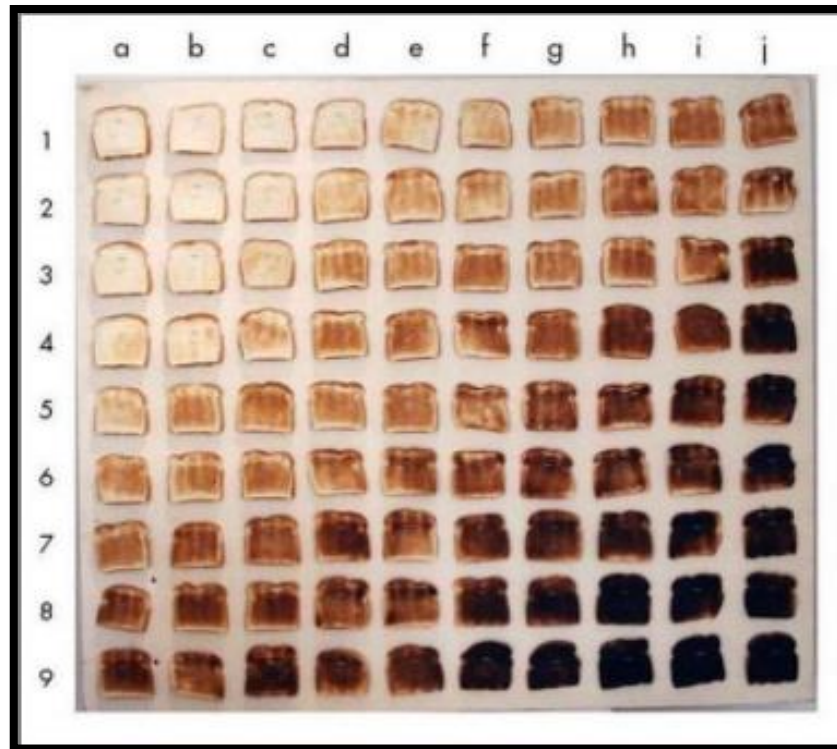


Figure 52 Trivia Question

It was a post on day 4 on PE promotion that had the highest average follower engagement of 10% of all the photographs posted on Instagram over the four-week period. The post on day 5 on PE promotion scored the highest number of statements (962) from followers that the Body Coach had motivated them to exercise. In total 2,308 people who commented on the photograph posts stated they were either motivated or inspired by him.

4.3.2 Trishas Transformation Netnography Findings

The second health and fitness influencer is Trisha Lewis and she is the lady behind Trishas Transformation. She is a qualified chef living in Limerick and in 2017, she approached her 30th birthday in misery, suffering from depression and weighing approximately 27 stone. She was thinking of undergoing gastric bypass surgery in Belgium but instead made a last-ditch attempt to turn her life around and go to the gym

(Fetherston, 2021). A few weeks later, having spent most of her time avoiding mirrors, she made the decision to film her workout sessions. In 2018, a friend of hers suggested she start an Instagram account to track her journey as it would keep her accountable and she called it ‘Trisha's Transformation’. Three years later with over 8 stone weight loss, giving up smoking, joining a gym and transforming her diet and informing her Instagram followers all the way through, she grew her Instagram following to 197,000 (see table 7). Her followers are from both the passion and trigger event community. People join because it addresses things that speak to their deep needs and ideals. They look to engage and interact with like-minded individuals, as well as hearing new information around this topic. Many are on a similar weight loss journey with her. Conversely, many are triggered by an event such as the want to lose weight and get healthier as they have a special occasion and are bound in a certain point in time. The difference between Trisha and Joe is that she has built a two-way community. To her it’s not just about collecting followers, she is on a personal journey and many of her followers are on a similar journey with her so social engagement plays a huge role in her online community.

Table 7 Trisha Transformation Instagram Audience

Following	Followers
742	197,000

4.3.2.1 Trishas Transformation Findings

Over the period of four weeks (31 days), Trisha posted 8 videos and 17 photos on her Instagram feed (see table 9). The video posts amounted to a total of 43,013 likes and photos amounted to 195,125 likes. The average follower engagement on Instagram per video was 3% and per photograph was 6%. She used 42 hashtags on her videos and 50 hashtags on her photographs.

4.3.2.1.1 Trishas Video Posts

The most frequent posted video type was ‘cooking demonstration’ with 5 posts. There were two ‘Aldi promotion Ads’ and one ‘Inspiration’ video. It was this Inspiration video posted on the 25th day that scored the most likes at 22,235. This was a video showing her at 27 stone, drinking a pint of beer in 5 seconds on a night out with friends

and it then shows her on the present day, eight stone lighter and ‘this is my fight song’ theme music playing in the background. This one post also had 12% followers engagement (see table 8).

Table 8 Trisha Transformation Video Post Summary

March	Video	Type	Likes	Comments	Friends Tagged	#	Name of Hashtags	Motivated/ Inspired	Avg. follower engagement
6	1	Cooking Demo	2,864	151	65	0		0	2%
13	2	Cooking Demo	3,300	255	56	4	#food #italianfood #weightloss #weightlossjourney	0	2%
14	3	Cooking Demo	2,780	141	68	9	#vegetarian #tasty #reels #happy #vegetarianrecipes #mushrooms #chef #weightloss #lunch	0	1%
18	4	Cooking Demo	4700	206	162	9	#food #potatoes #reels #vegan #vegetarian #fakeaway #reelsinstagram #ireland #weightloss	0	2%
20	5	Cooking Demo	3502	141	62	6	#fakeaway #weightloss #weightlossjourney #motivation #food #foodporn	0	2%
25	6	Aldi Promotion Ad	1,680	1537	42	4	#ad #cooking #chef #aldi	0	2%
25	7	Inspiration	22,235	639	36	6	#happy #motivation #obesity #love #beforeandafter #love	265	12%
31	8	Aldi Promotion Ad	1,952	111	8	4	#ad #brandambassador #irish #irishfood	0	1%

There were 6 hashtags used on this video: #happy, #motivation, #obesity, #love, #beforeandafter and #love. The two most frequent hashtags used through the four-week period were #weightloss and #food (see figure 53). The number of people who mentioned they were inspired to exercise and get healthier on this video post was 265.



Figure 53 Most frequent hashtags used

Trisha has a promotional partnership which she is very upfront about with her followers. However, the Aldi promotions scored the least amount of likes with the first ad posted on the 25th day with 1,680 likes. Interestingly this same add did have 1,537 comments from followers, which meant that it had 2% average engagement from followers. Many of the comments were tagging friends are seeking further tips on the recipe. The second ad posted on 31st day had 1,952 likes and 111 comments giving it a lower average engagement of 1%. Trisha did acknowledge on the hashtags that these were ads using the following hashtags: #ad, #cooking, #chef, #aldi.

It was the cooking demo that achieved the most likes (4,700), posted on the 18th day and it was the video that had the most friends tagged (162). This post had 9 hashtags; #vegetarian, #tasty, #reels, #happy, #vegetarianrecipes, #mushrooms, #chef, #weightloss, #lunch.

4.3.2.1.2 Trishas Photograph Posts

The most frequent type of photograph posted was an ‘Inspiring’ image of her weight loss transformations, with 11 posts over the four-week period. It was an ‘inspiring’ photograph posted on day 26, that scored the most likes (47,532) and the most comments (3,523), thus giving an average follower engagement of 26% (see table 9). In second place was another ‘inspiring’ photograph, posted on day 21, with 28,090 likes and 1,604 comments, with 15% average follower engagement. The number of comments on photos posted, where people mentioned they were inspired by her was 1112.

Table 9 Trisha Tranformation Photograph Post Summary

Photo	Type	Likes	Comments	Friends tagged	#	Name of Hashtags	Motivated/ Inspired	Avg. follower engagement
1	Body Transformation	14,640	219	18	0		12	8%
9	Aldi Promotion Ad	7,655	1316	726	6	#food #nomnom #yummy #weightloss #weightlossjourney #weekend	0	5%
15	Cooking Class Promotion	1,997	93	52	3	#cooking #course #fakeaway	0	1%
2	Cooking Class Promotion	4,053	182	32	0		0	2%
16	Inspiring	47,532	3523	25	0		350	26%
14	Inspiring	28,090	1604	22	6	#happy #beforeandafter #weightloss #weightlosstransformation #weightlossmotivation #motivation	180	15%
10	Inspiring	8,052	94	16	3	#motivation #love #healthylifestyle	38	4%
17	Inspiring	13,429	289	16	7	#reset #happy #love #motivation #motivationalquotes #ed #weightloss	95	7%
13	Inspiring	8,451	268	6	5	#weightloss #weightlossjourney #smile #motivation #motivationalquotes	96	4%
5	Inspiring	8,034	65	3	0		28	4%
3	Inspiring	9,599	305	2	4	#weightloss #weightlossjourney #happy #smile	96	5%
11	Inspiring	5,265	105	2	5	#weightloss #happy #workout #smile #motivation	62	3%
6	Cooking Class Promotion	6,973	115	1	0		20	4%
4	Inspiring	13,467	173	0	0		62	7%
7	TV Show	5,174	116	0	4	#cooking #television #excited #happy	0	3%
8	Inspiring	5,016	120	0	5	#obesity #ed #weightloss #weightlossjourney #weightlosstransformation	38	3%
12	Inspiring	7,698	105	0	2	#irish #stpatricksday	35	4%

Similar to her video posts, #weightloss was the most popular hashtag used in photographs. In second and third place was #happy and #motivation (see figure 54).



Figure 54 Most frequent hashtags used in photographs

A variety of important findings were generated by the mixed approach of the survey and netnographic analysis. It appears, that social media plays a large role in the life of adults and is much more than a place to source and share information. It is an environment where people can express their identity, build their social networks and convey their views. They are channels for motivation and inspiration and building a community of support from like-minded people.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study and refer to the literature review to highlight the salient points enclosed within the current study. This chapter is divided into two themes, the first is social media and the latter is online fitness classes.

5.2 Social Media Engagement

It is important to note that all participants from the survey were active on a variety of social media platforms. Surprisingly, Instagram was the most preferred platform amongst the participants with a mode age between 40-60 years. By contrast, research by Sprout Social (2021) report that the target market for Instagram is 18-24 year olds and indeed Facebook still wears the crown as the most popular social media brand with 2.7 billion monthly active users.

All participants in the survey use social media daily with 65% using it for more than an hour each day and almost half (48%) research information about fitness classes through social media. Drawing from the literature review, Digital (2021), implicate that approximately 45% of global internet users say that they turn to social networks at least once per month when looking for information about products or services that they're thinking of buying.

5.2.1 Instagram

This next finding highlights Instagram as the social channel where influencers could have most impact. The most popular reason for survey respondents to choose their favourite platform was that it helped them to stay connected to their family and friends and staying up to date with what is happening. Notably, the most popular reason for choosing Instagram was its content, photos and familiarity. This finding confirms the concept of (Kozinets, 2020), that Instagram is a visual native site built on the idea of communicating and interacting through photographs. In addition, the netnographic study supports this finding as all posts by either influencer were either image or video based.

In a recent study analysing social media posts from the National Cancer Institute's Facebook page, social media posts with images were more engaging and received significantly more likes, comments, and shares than posts without images (Strekalova & Krieger, 2017). Many of the images posted were of the influencer or body transformation of a fan. In the case of exercise-related social media posts, images featuring other people may be especially influential as they provide a highly accessible opportunity for the viewer to visually engage in social comparison (Festinger, 1954) – an opportunity that is not present in messages without an image. Images of physically fit individuals or people exercising can prompt upward social comparisons if viewers see those people as being better than themselves (e.g., more motivated or more physically fit), and this upward social comparison can motivate people to pursue self-improvement goals such as exercise behaviour (Collins, 1996; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005).

5.2.2 Follower Engagement

This study's focal findings on the netnography study, reveal the interplay between influencers content and engagement strategy and followers engagement behaviour. The study finds that follower count is negatively associated with follower engagement. With the Body Coach followers reaching 4.1 million and Trisha hitting almost 200 thousand, each influencer falls into a very distinct category. The Body Coach is a 'Mega Macro' Influencer and in contrast Trisha is a 'Mid' Influencer. As highlighted by Fohr (2021), this distinction of influencer follower count, impacts feed post engagement rates. Warren & Gillian (2021) further argue, that this is a valuable indicator of interest, and can be used to gauge how much conversion power an influencer has. The all-industry median benchmark for Instagram engagement rate per post is 1.2%, which has decreased by 23% from 1.6% in 2019 (Sprout Social, 2021).

Interestingly, just over half of respondents from the survey, follow fitness influencers and just over half engage with the influencer by commenting, liking, and sharing their posts. Within the netnography research, the Body Coach made a total of 50 Instagram posts in the four-week period with an average follower engagement of 1%. In comparison, what was found to be quite fascinating, is that Trisha made half (n25) the

number of posts, however, she had accrued a much better, average follower engagement of 5%. This finding supports the research by Fohr (2021), who determined that influencers that have the highest engagement rate of all are the ones with less followers. In addition, Fohr argues that as the follower count increases there is a steady decrease in the average engagement rate. He concludes that Mega macro influencers have a rate of 0.8% on average – 5 times lower than Nano influencers who have between 0k and 10k followers. Based on Fohr’s analysis of over 3.5M posts on Instagram, the overall average engagement rate across all influencer groups is 1.9%.

Notably the Body Coach has a far higher following, than Trisha’s Transformation, however, his has a far lower average follower engagement rate. The reason for this finding is likely related to followers identification with influencers, which has been shown as integral to the influencer-follower relationship (Childers et al., 2019). As influencers amass a large follower base and start to resemble traditional celebrities, followers identification with them weakens, thereby diminishing their engagement behaviour. This finding is consistent with previous findings that followers engage with influencers favourably when their identification with them is strong (Mc Cann, 2021).

It is notable that The Body Coach, as a mega macro influencer has reached the stage, after a few years of posting free workout videos, he now focuses more on posting content on Instagram that provide profit for his business. In contrast Trisha, who is at the mid-tier and early stages of growing her follower base and continues to micromanage and post more so ‘Inspiring’ videos and photos of her personal weight loss journey. However, she does fair out with better overall engagement with her followers.

Another difference in engagement was based on the message or content conveyed in the posts. One observation was made when a body transformation image of a follower was posted or a question was asked by the influencers, members of their community responded with answers and their admiration, thus spiralling their engagement.

What is interesting is that her followers have asked on several occasions if she could inform them of her exercise routines and Trisha consistently refers them to a third-party fitness app that has no association with her brand. This is in line with Peterson (2010),

ethical issue concerning health and fitness professionals, suggesting they should not represent themselves in a misleading or deceptive manner to those with whom they interact and should only provide services and advice in those areas in which they are qualified by education, experience and training. In comparison, the Body Coach provides both fitness and nutrition expertise to his audience and this rounded approach, it could be argued, is the key to attracting a much larger following.

Evidence from the survey showed reasons followers liked and followed social media influencers are mainly due to positivity, enjoyment, inspiration, motivation, and honesty (see table 10). Johnston and Davis (2019) advocate that social media portrayals of exercise as being enjoyable and rewarding may promote more positive attitudes toward exercise behaviour.

Table 10 Reasons why survey respondents follow social media influencers

Positivity	“keeps it real, very open, shares his struggles and he feels just like yourself, engages well on social media with live Q&A sessions, His you tube channel with free workouts for all levels add variety, positive all-round” Male ¹
	“She is very positive and upbeat” S43
	“He’s a positive person, good attitude, positive for community, inclusive” S57 Male
Enjoyment	“I enjoy her online sessions and online social community” S42
Inspiration / motivation	“Inspirational and motivational pictures and videos on YouTube and Instagram” S50 Female
Honesty	“I like that she is fit and strong but enjoys her lifestyle and is not necessarily very slim, (I don’t mean that in a bad way!) She is very honest, she knows how to get lean, but she is happy with a balance in her life which is more important to her and I like that” S68 Female
	“I only follow trainers that are local, and I know so that I can trust them” S72 Female

¹ S followed by a number, denotes a response given in the survey by a particular participant

The researcher noted a number of respondents follow and are loyal to their local gyms online and the reasons they provide are because they “get support”, “meet familiar faces” and they “find motivation from group exercise classes”. What is interesting to note, is that many of these same respondents also follow ‘Mega Macro’ or ‘Mid’ influencers online such as The Body Coach and Trishas Transformation for healthy eating and exercise tips.

Furthermore, the researcher, in her role as a fitness coach, has on many occasions, discussed and recommended various online fitness influencers with her own clients and sometimes the roles were reversed where the clients recommended fitness influencers to her. Through her dealings with the public, she has come to realise that no one fitness instructor can fulfil every need of every client. In contrast, what she has discovered is that influencers such as the Body Coach and Trishas Transformation can provide much needed motivation and inspirations to fulfil their emotional and psychological needs which enables them to stay on track and achieve their goals.

More evidence can be found in the netnography study to support the argument of McCann (2021), as it was clear that Trisha had a much more hands on approach and micromanaged her Instagram. She directly replied to her online community’s comments, in detail herself, therefore building a strong connection with her fans (see table 11).

Table 11 Trishas questions from followers and her answers

Followers Questions	Trishas reply
“Trish I work different shifts can you get it later?” N34 ²	“You can I’ll email the recording out the next day” N42
“would love to do this, will there be a list of products etc. put up that we could each cook along, I’m useless when it comes to the kitchen” N35	“Yes Yes I will be sending you the full shopping list the Friday before! So you will know it all xx” N43
“Can I book and join with my son (he’s 12)?” N36	“Of course you can Xxx” N44
“In time if there is enough people interested would you consider doing a vegan or vegetarian course?” N37	“Of course. I’ll be doing a full one of vegan and vegetarian because it would be unfair to have only one on a course so it’s best to keep separate” N45
“Hi Trisha could you give me the exact amounts to make the paste for the chicken curry” N41	“It’s all written in the caption tap the arrow by the title xx” N49

In contrast, The Body Coach seldom replied to any comments made by his fans. Instead, it was his followers within his tribal community that aided in the reply process (see table 12). His interactions with followers is limited primarily to the image or video he posts, which is not dissimilar from how traditional celebrities interact on Instagram; Kardashian does not answer comments either. The Body Coaches’ practices are distinct from forms of microcelebrity where practitioners interact to actively increase their audience. Realistically, it would be physically impossible for him to reply to all questions and comments, as there was such a large volume attached to each post. Comparable to (Lizhen Xu, 2014), the development of social media has resulted in consumers supporting each other by generating content and voice opinions to provide their peers with information in relation to their previous experience with the consumption of products or services. Furthermore, Scarapicchia et al. (2016), postulate that having supportive social relationships can reduce the likelihood of individuals

² N followed by a number, denotes a comment given by a particular follower in the netnography study

adopting unhealthy behaviours, by minimizing the impact of daily stressors or stressful events or by engaging in health behaviours such as Physical Activity. Zheng et al. (2015) pointed out that this type of positive eWOM fosters a stronger relationship towards the brand and by that also increases the member’s brand loyalty.

Table 12 Body Coach questions and answers by his followers

Followers Questions	Body Coachs tribal community reply
“Can I use 4 pint milk bottle filled with water only I have not got any dumbbells” (N7)	“Great alternative! If it gets too light, put a few bottles in a rucksack and hold that. Easy way of adding a bit more intensity to your workout. And if a 4-pinter gets too tough – drink some! Hope you’re enjoying your workouts Robert, if you need any tips, just ask” N50
“can you share with us which protein powder you use or recommend what to use? Tks” (N10)	“Joe recommends MyProtein on the 90 day plan, I have tried and I am satisfied so far, I include some in my on-plan meals’ recipes as well as drink a scoop with water post workout to help muscle repair and ease DOMS” N53

What is very apparent in from the netnographic study of the body coach is that the sense of emotional support is strong from members of his online Instagram community. Members got motivated to touch inner emotions. For example, after Joe posted a message on Instagram about a new 15-minute workout available on his free YouTube channel one online fan announced:

“I’m struggling! I have zero and I mean ZERO motivation at the moment. I was on my own with 3 kids for lockdown 1 for 6 months and my husband was working away. It was so tough. I binge ate in the evenings and I’ve piled on the weight. I need to get my focus back” N9

It was interesting to that those comments generally created further engagement and got many likes and replies such as:

“you can do this, just put one step forward and take one day at a time, just break the couch habit, get up and get at it, keep moving forward and believe in urself” N52

This particular cry for help seemingly struck a cord with the Body Coach as he tagged her and posted her two love heart emojis. This demonstrates the importance of and understanding of, and sensitivity to emotional exchanges surrounding tribal communities. Seeing the humanistic approach enables the tribe to relate and connect with the micro celebrity in a sympathetic manner and builds a stronger bond therefore deepening loyalty (Chen et al., 2011). Similar to Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs, Glanz et. al. (2002) points out that by meeting basic human needs for companionship, intimacy, a sense of belonging, and reassurance of one’s worth as a person, supportive ties may enhance well-being and health, regardless of stress levels. This ties in with the research objective as this is a discovery of a motivation for following fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to exercise.

This netnography study also finds that content volume is negatively associated with follower engagement. This finding is consistent with prior finding by Casaló, et al. (2020), who dictates that sharing a large volume of Instagram posts might interfere with influencers' creativity and originality. At the same time, owing to the massive amount of content that users are exposed to on social media, content originality is crucial to gain followers’ attention and motivate them to engage with content. Evidence of this is true from open-ended responses in the survey:

“I no longer follow any fitness influencers as my focus on social media is elsewhere. I found a lot of fitness influencers gave unscientific advice and unrealistic expectations to followers and the volume of content provided daily became boring” S98 Female

Edvardsson et al. (2000), advocate that companies have realised that it’s not enough just to have a huge social following, engagement with the community is a very important factor. Every active engagement brings communities closer to a company’s

brand, which increases brand visibility. Furthermore, Sheth & Parvatlyar (1995), elude that customer–brand loyalty in cyberspace demonstrates an evolution from the traditional product-driven, marketer-controlled concept towards a distribution-driven, consumer-controlled and technology-facilitated concept. What consumers now hear or read about brands from other consumers or communities (through e.g. social media) is becoming much more important than what marketers say about their own brands, and as Christodoulides (2008), argued, more attention should be paid in the value co-creation of brand in a dialectical process. Social media, by its nature, provides an advanced environment for marketing and in branding.

5.2.3 Social Media Ads

Within the four-week period, The Body Coach displayed two video ads for Goustocooking (see figure 55). The first ad posted on day 16 achieved 22,255 likes, scoring less than one percent in follower engagement and the second one scored 5,846 likes, with even less follower engagement. However, the posts did attract quiet a lot of tagging of friends with enthusiastic comments such as “lets give this a go!”, “I think we have our task of the week!!!”, “I think we’ll try this next?”.

In contrast, the ads did also attract some negative comments such as “You have such an annoying voice”, “Jesus Christ”, “had 2 gone off chickens from this place last week”. There were very few negative comments in any other post in the four-week period and the researcher felt this could be attributed to the fact that the followers recognised a sponsored post less enthusiastically and were weary that the influencer is only delivering the content because they are getting paid. Boerman et. al.(2014), support this view and argue that research on sponsorship disclosures has demonstrated that when media content is identified as advertising prior to or during exposure, people process the information more critically and are more resistant to persuasion.

The researcher, also noted that the day an ad was posted to Instagram by an influencer, there were no other posts made by the influencer on that same day. This could possibly be intentional as it may be part of the deal arranged with the sponsor in order to reduce social media saturation and give full attention to the ad.



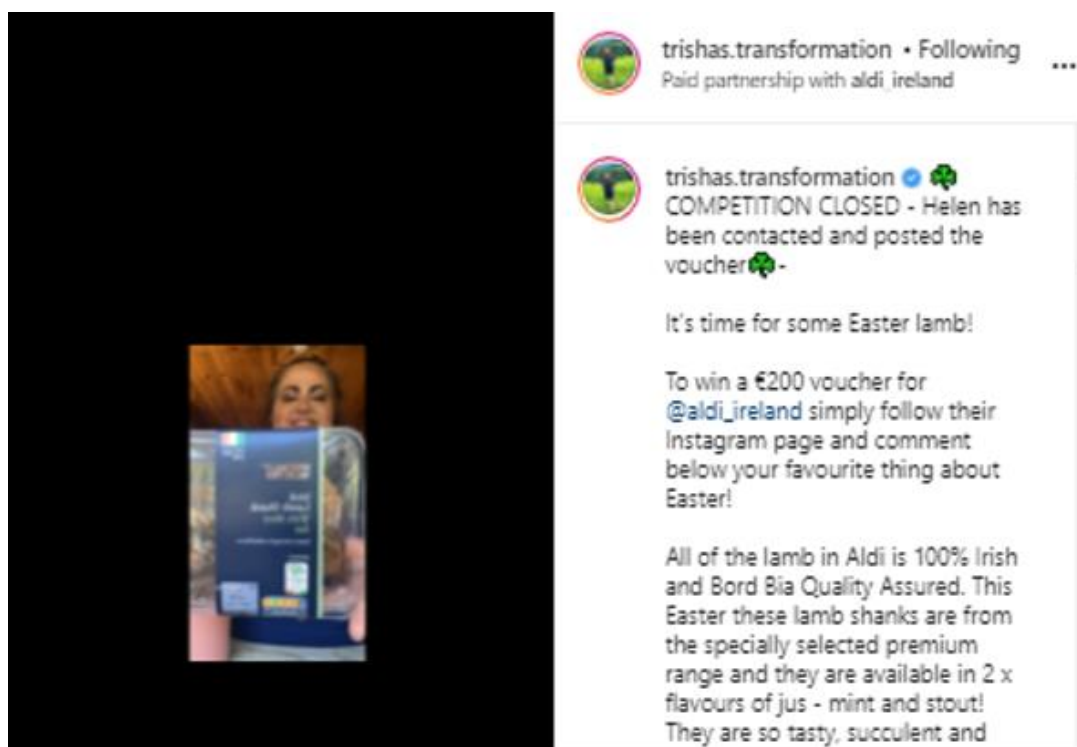
Figure 55 Paid partnership (Ad) with Goustocooking - March 30th 2021

Trisha is affiliated with Aldi and she posted two ads in the four-week period (see figure 56). The first ad had 1680 likes with an average of 2% of followers engaging. The second ad had 655 likes with an average of 5% of followers engaging. Interestingly both influencers' ads were connected to food, however, in contrast to the Body Coach, Trisha ran a competition as part of her ad and consequently received 1,535 comments, which is 1400 more than what the Body Coach attained with his ad. Therefore, it is evident from this study that followers engaged more in ad posts, when there was a competition involved.

Findings from both netnographies have determined that the influencers maintained professional boundaries showing respect at all times for their followers which according to Peterson (2010) is one of the ethical issues facing health & fitness professional. He argues that professionals should not represent themselves in a misleading or deceptive manner to those with whom they interact. Such misrepresentation is a violation of professional ethics and compromises the level of trust and integrity that are essential components of appropriate professional conduct. Furthermore, it is clear from the findings that followers prefer to see genuine posts about the influencers themselves and when an ad is displayed there is overall less engagement from the tribal community. This is consistent with Mudambi and Schuff (2010), who dictate that initially, followers are attracted by the opportunity to access content that originates from other "ordinary" consumers, thought to be non-commercial

in nature and thus, more trustworthy than marketer-initiated communication and collaborations with brands may call this authenticity into question. Influencers intrinsic desires to create content about their personal passions might be side-tracked by commercial opportunities to promote brands or products they would not ordinarily be interested in.

The empirical support from this finding is deduced further from research carried out by Tafesse and Wood (2021), whose conceptual framework prove that there are implications for brands partnering with Instagram influencers who place disproportionate weight on follower count when vetting influencers for partnership. Their findings indicate that partnerships with brands do not come without risks for both parties and there are ramifications in selecting influencers based purely on follower count which can be counterproductive. They recommend brands to diversify their vetting criteria by considering influencers' followers count, content volume, and domains of interest. It is to be surmised that Instagram influencers who combine a higher follower count with a diverse domain of interest tend to fare worse in terms of generating follower engagement. In addition, finding from Sprout Social (2021), show that one of the top four reasons consumers will unfollow a brand on social media are too many ads.



5.2.4 Videos versus Photos

Photographs were more popular with followers than videos. Overall they gained far more likes and comments, thus their engagement rate was much higher. According to Sprout Social (2021), users on Instagram are much more likely to just double tap on a picture they find appealing than watch a video and interact with it. This means that the short-term engagement for videos in the form of likes is lower than with pictures.

However, Newswhip.com (2021), acknowledge that Instagram has gone through a mountain of changes in recent years, adding features like Instagram Stories, live-streaming, and carousel photo albums. In their report, which focused on the output of photo vs. video for the top Instagram publishers in May 2017, they discovered that almost 67 percent of posts from these 30 engaging publishers were photo posts, while 33 percent were videos. Only eight of the 30 publishers posted more video content than photo content in May.

5.3 Fitness Influencers

A key development from the surveys was that from those who stated they follow fitness influencers, the male participants only followed male fitness influencers. In contrast, the females followed both male and female or female only. Research by Rodgers et al. (2011), reveals the striking differences in behaviour within social networks between men and women. Whereby, female representatives tends to respond to offers of friendship from persons of the opposite sex much faster than men.

5.3.1 Motivation and Inspiration

Two main keywords were very apparent in both netnographies; motivation and inspiration. According to Prasad (2014), some people seem to mistake motivation for inspiration. They think that both words have the same meaning, and they often use one word for the other.

Prasad (2014) asserts that motivation requires a motive and is a pulling force. If someone is to go and exercise, they motivate themselves by reminding themselves of

the motive for doing exercise. This is consistent with the results from the survey, which show that many respondents are motivated to exercise because they want to lose or maintain a healthy weight. Prasad (2014) further suggests that ‘inspiration’ is a driving force, a feeling from deep within, where it touches you on the inside and connects you to a state of being more excited, productive, purposeful or anything that comes from been inspired. What can be concluded from the survey findings, is that respondents seek to follow influencers as they have a motive to get healthier and lose or maintain weight and they seek inspiration for fitness influencers, to drive them towards their goal.

5.3.1.1 Trishas ‘Inspiration’

Interestingly, the word ‘inspiration’ was more commonly used in comments made by the followers in Trishas Transformation than the followers in The Body Coach. One such fan noted;

“Trisha ur an inspirational person. You need to go through something to tell the story. You really don’t know how many people our helping day by day hour by hour. I will personally thank you when I get to the end of my journey” N33.

This could be attributed to the fact that Trisha was on a very personal journey of weight loss herself, which resonated deep within, with many of her followers, as they too were on a similar journey. Sokolova and Perez (2021) argue that the positive results of fitness shown by an influencer could be seen as “attainable” and inspiring.

It is evident that many of Trishas posts are not flattering to her personal image (see figure 57). However, it’s these very images that touch an emotional core with her fans. Many of her fans poured out heartening comments after looking at images of Trisha when she was at an all time low in her life. One fan said:

“Tut.. I’m not crying, you are (dunno why this brought a tear to my eye but it’s a mad feeling of feeling proud of someone ya never met before but, woman you are an inspiration” N38

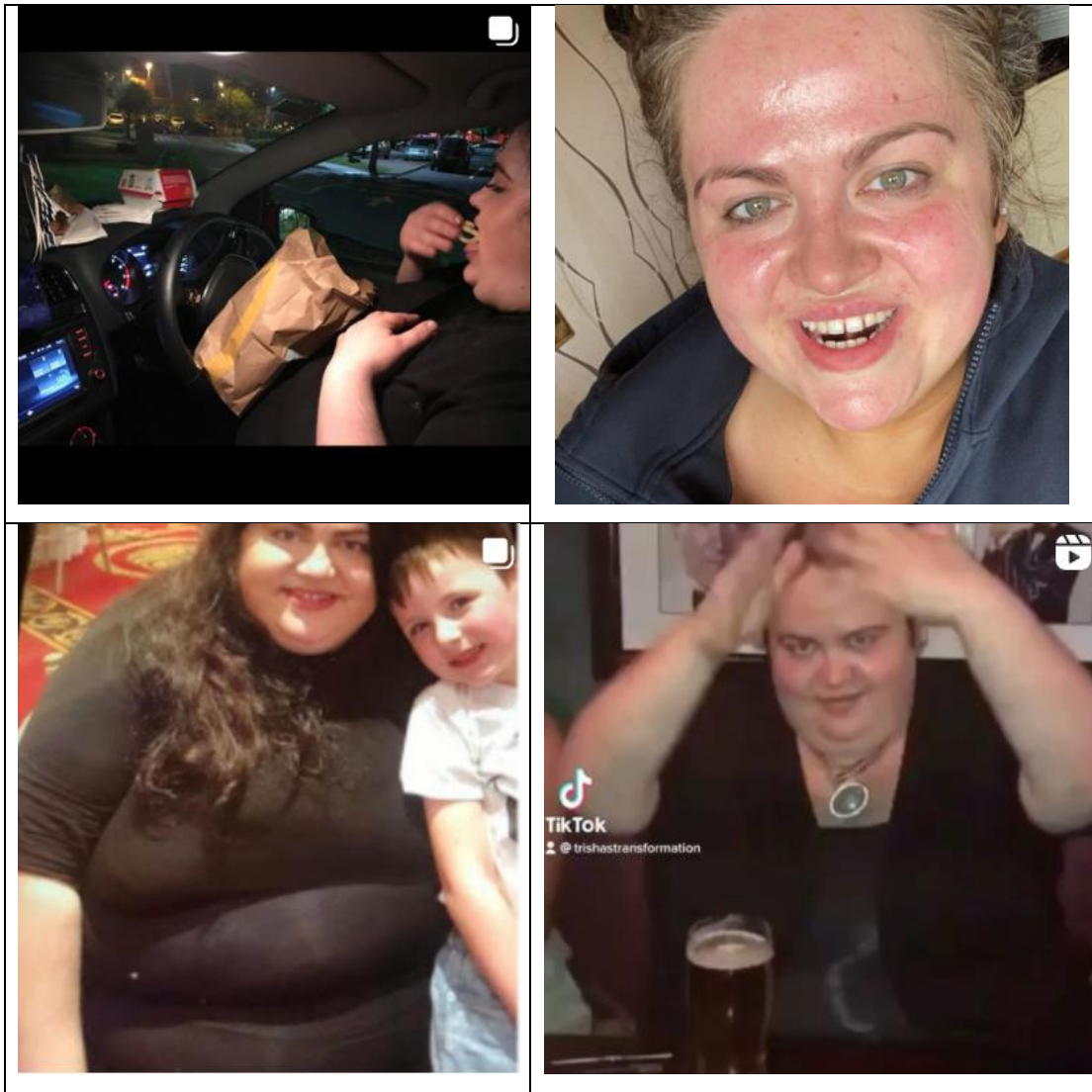


Figure 57 Images of Trishas Journey

5.3.1.2 *Body Coach 'Motivation'*

What was very apparent from the netnography study was that whilst Trisha inspired many followers to eat healthier and lose weight. It was the Body Coach, who is a qualified fitness coach, who motivated many of his followers to exercise online. The Body Coach, throughout the covid lockdown, provided free online fitness classes on YouTube to the public, with millions tuning in all over the world to 'PE with Joe'. On March 5th he gave an emotional thank you to his Instagram followers for tuning into his live 'PE with Joe' videos, which initiated a mass outpouring of positive comments from his fans.

In his video he stated that “since its broadcast, PE with Joe has been viewed one hundred million times and at its peak over 955,000 fans took part in the online fitness class at the very same time and broke the world record of the largest live stream fitness class ever”. He mentioned that he raised over 610,00 for NHS and children in need and it was one of his proudest moments ever. It was very apparent that the word ‘motivation’ was more commonly used in comments made by followers in the Body Coach than in Trishas Transformation. This comment reflects the theme of many of his followers:

“What an absolute legend Joe. I don’t think you realise you just switched on a whole generation or two to regular exercise in their day, who probably didn’t even like it before! You should be proud #motivated” (N1)

Some fans took the time to write quite lengthy comments which displayed their gratitude:

“Another fan said “I will always remember PE with Joe. I never tried a HIIT workout before last March and you have motivated and converted me to them 100%. I now often go onto your YouTube and do the workouts. I need some solid exercise as the gym was off limits and your workouts online have provided that and proved how much I can do at home. It’s so true what you say about exercise helping with mental health. I have a lot of issues going on and your online videos help me escape and feel good about myself” N42)

An area that does warrant further investigation is the moral and ethical issues surrounding the offering of free exercise classes to the public. The researcher can visible see all the positivity surrounded in what the Body Coach had done to lift the spirits of the nation throughout lockdown, however, it is also apparent that he too has gained subliminally through the huge growth in his following on all his social media platforms. He was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his efforts and gained huge media coverage worldwide. Shortly after sending out his last post on Instagram referring to ‘PE with Joe’ he was marketing his newly designed ‘Bodycoach App’ to the very same audience. This was an app that people could download to their iPhone at a cost £89.99 and have exclusive live workouts every week. According to Peterson (2010), the underlying precept that should guide all business-related endeavours by health/fitness professions is honesty and their words and behaviour should be totally

free from deceit, dishonesty or fraud. There is no doubt that the Body Coach followed these business practice ethics, however, it is evident that this charity work has proved to be beneficial to his personal brand and his company.

5.4 Harmful effects of social media

While social media has facilitated a connection for people, some argue that it has created many mental health issues in the process (Best et al., 2014). Research have found that harmful effects of social media include increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depression, and cyber-bullying (Primack *et al.*, 2016). Whilst the netnography research did not highlight any negative emotions from followers, in contrast, the survey did highlight the negative emotions expressed by respondents who opted to no longer follow fitness influencers. The main reasons that came to light are related to mental health, feeling bad about their body and lack of trust:

“Some fitness influencers make me feel bad about my body, so I unfollowed” S68
Female

“I no longer follow any fitness influencers as my focus on social media is elsewhere. I found a lot of fitness influencers gave unscientific advice and unrealistic expectations to followers” S98 Female

“I have stopped following a lot of influencers in general during lockdown as it just wasn't good for my mental health” S92 Female

5.5 Exercise and online fitness classes

A mere thirteen percent of respondents did not participate in any other exercise activities alongside fitness classes. Furthermore, over half of them stated that they also go walking and a third go running. Other activities engaged in on a lesser scale were swimming, cycling, horse-riding, boxing and GAA.

World Health Organisation (2018), findings argue that the effect of sedentary behaviour is stronger in those who do low amounts of moderate – to vigorous-intensity physical activity can mitigate the unfavourable health outcomes associated with higher levels of sedentary behaviours which leads to all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease mortality and cancer mortality. Their findings show that the effect of sedentary

behaviour is stronger in those who do low amounts of moderate – to vigorous-intensity physical activity can mitigate the unfavourable health outcomes associated with higher levels of sedentary behaviours which leads to all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease mortality and cancer mortality. In contrast, this research demonstrates that occupations such as a Counsellor or Administrator, that involve high levels of sedentary positions, high levels of fitness class, high intensity exercise, and other physical exercise participation was evident and very significant.

Seventy-two percent of respondents to the survey state they have attended both online and face to face classes. However, the respondents state that a post shared by a fitness influencer only motivated 25% of the respondents to try out a class online.

In contrast, the evidence from the netnography study suggests that thousands of followers were motivated to exercise online, due to the Bodycoach and Trishas daily interactions on Instagram. The findings of the netnography illustrate that over the four-week period 3046 people were either inspired or motivated because of Joe Wicks and to break it down further, over 1000 of these comments made reference to online exercise. In comparison, over the same period 1377 people mentioned they were inspired or motivated because of Trisha Lewis.

One admiring fan posted the following comment after viewing her inspirational post (see figure 58):

“I would love to try a HIIT class online, I’m so lazy. Is there a beginners one you could recommend to get me started. And I literally have one kettle bell and four kids in the house so short and sweet. Plus could u give any tips on your really good weeks where you’re really full from food yet the losses happened. I’m struggling with filling family meals that still stop me picking. Or savour snack ideas that are not carrots. I’d love some savoury snack ideas”.

Many of Trishas fans add further comments throughout this same post which are all positive; “legend”, “I think you’re great, brutally honest and hilarious”. “Deadly combination”, “started back walking yesterday, thank you”. It is very clear they view her as their role model and many of her fans enjoy sharing their own

accomplishments/achievements with her, which she responds to positively with praise such as “well done”, “keep it up”, “beat the bulge”.



Figure 58 Trishas Transformation - Inspirational Quote - March 7th 2021

Trisha walks at least 5km each day and has mentioned this in a number of posts (see figure 59). She gets her tribe motivated and one fan commented;

“Trisha,, you’re some woman! I’m the exact same, if I don’t exercise in the morning I’m making excuses all day to avoid it! I’d even clean the house rather than do it, and that’s saying something! Exercise before the day starts is a game changer.... Keep going you’re doing amazing and with a great big smile too” *N40*

There was one fan who did make an adversative comment in the same post;

“Don’t you not be exhausted after all that?? If I went for a walk before work I’d be exhausted, to tired for that craic in the morning”

Trisha was quick to reply “no I feel energised for the day from it! X” and got lots of love hearts from her fans in support of her comment. This demonstrates how loyal her tribal community are to her.

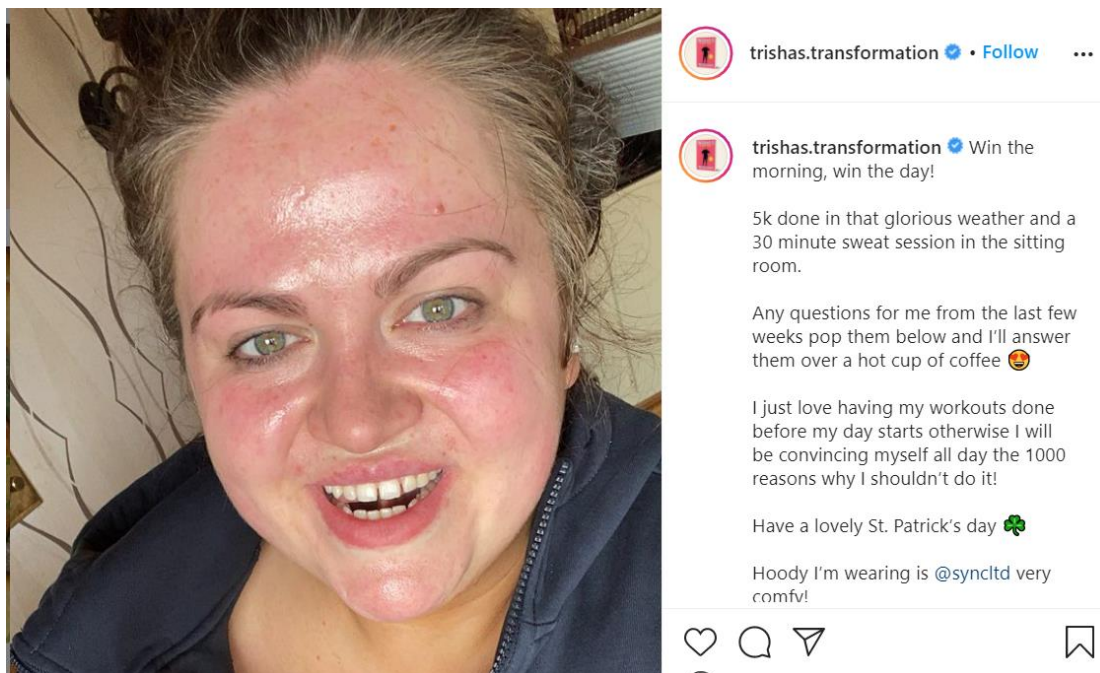


Figure 59 Trishas Daily 5k Walk inspiration - March 17th

The difference between the results from the survey and netnography is very significant and clearly illustrate why it is important to use a mixed approach method to collect data, as the results from each method derive very different results. This could also be attributed to the fact that the sample size for the survey was quite small (N103) whilst the followers on Instagram were quite large, that is, over (4.1 million).

5.5.1 Disadvantages to online exercise classes

Sixty-four percent of the survey respondents stated that there were disadvantages to online fitness classes. The open-ended survey questions provided more insight into these disadvantages, with the main themes been less social and lack of motivation:

“I think the main disadvantage would be not getting out of the house and meeting new people”. S58 Female

“Need to be more motivated to do it by yourself, can be more family interruptions, More chance doing moves incorrectly” S47 Female

“I tend to take it easier at home with camera off, the atmosphere of a group class encouraging each other is lost” S73 Female

5.5.2 Advantages of online exercise classes

In contrast to the disadvantages, there were many positives to online fitness classes, as stated by the respondents to the survey. The main ones are not having to travel, no need for childcare and the fact that it can be done at home:

“comfort of your own home, no travelling, can fit better into schedule, kids can join in, can repeat if you like if it’s recorded, huge variety online, can skip the bits you don’t like” S24 Female

“It takes less time and planning, it gives you more time in the day, it stops you from being as self-conscious, it’s enjoyable” S31 Female

“comfort of your own home, no excuses, motivated as others are doing it” S37 Female

“advantage for me are related to the moment we are living in, when we can’t make it to the actual gym. I think there’s a lot of fitness classes for free on YouTube, but the advantage for me is being live. If its pre-recorded I might make an excuse and to show up as regularly.” S59 Male

“I was initially dubious regarding online classes as you don’t receive the full experience. However, I am fully on board with it after a year of online yoga” S23 Female

“Love the way any workout makes you feel afterwards. Love pushing myself and keeping up with the Bodycoach and possibly using heavier weights and beating him, love online classes, great to be able to workout at home” S33 Male

There is some debate around group fitness classes versus individual participation (Yorks et al., 2017). Their findings show us that there are many more benefits derived from physical exercise of any kind, however, the addition of group exercise of any kind may have additional benefits. In research they carried out to investigate the relationship between physical exercise and stress and quality of life in a medical student population they found that participation in face-to-face group fitness classes led to a decrease in

perceived stress and increase in physical, mental and emotional quality of life compared with participation who exercise individually.

5.6 Limitations

The study was not without limitations. To begin with, issues related to implementing research in an environment where one is both a student and employed is delicate. Surveying one's colleagues raises the issue of objectivity. To minimise such influence, the researcher ensured the survey was anonymous and no questions within the survey were worded in a manner that a staff member could be identified. Another issue, connected to objectivity, is that it may prove more difficult for colleagues to view the researcher other than a colleague than it may be for the researcher to view current colleagues as research subjects.

The issue of depending on surveys versus interviews as one of the main sources of data collection method was deeply considered. Some of the benefits of issuing the survey was that a larger sample of respondents could be targeted, and they could complete the survey in their own time allowing for sufficient memory recall. In contrast, interviews can exhibit bias or poor memory recall. For example, when the interviewee is facing the interviewer, they may say what they think the interviewer wants to hear and it may not always be the truth. However, the researcher does note that one of the benefits to conducting interviews is that it can allow for more open-ended discussions. Whilst the survey did include more open-ended questioning focusing on perceptions, expectations and experiences of respondents of online exercise classes, due to the overall study design, the researcher was unable to collect more in-depth qualitative data about participants' perception or to probe participants' responses further. Fewer responses from male participants meant their experiences, and the differences between female participants' experiences, were unable to be explored in greater depth.

In addition, since social media is a very vast concept, the researcher had to primarily focus on the most recognisable platforms of social media as they would be most preferred in Ireland. According to Ipsos (2020), the top two sites in Ireland in 2020 were Facebook at 69% and Instagram at 48%. However, responses from the survey indicated that the most preferred social media platform was indeed Instagram, hence for the purpose of this research, Instagram was used to investigate social media

marketing as part of the netnographic research. Therefore, limiting the research to just one social media platform does not give a full representation of all platforms and the differences between each.

Another limitation that warrants consideration is attributed to Covid 19 and its direct correlation on a swift move to digital adoption and as a reason for many participants to participate in online exercise class for the first time. This research clearly found that participants were impacted by the lockdown with sixty-four percent participating in an online fitness class directly as a result of gyms been closed. The netnography study clearly found the significant impact a digital media influencer had on millions of followers when the Body Coach aka PE with Joe, provided millions of followers with free online live weekly exercise classes from his living room from March 2020, when schools closed. Phygital reality became the new norm when consumers increasingly integrated virtual processes into their physical spaces with a greater amount of at-home experience.

Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the research by first reiterating the research purpose, design, and main findings. It then presents practical implications and recommendations drawn from the findings.

6.2 Research purpose

The aim of this dissertation was to investigate the extent of motivations for following health and fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to participate in general exercise and online fitness classes.

The research aim has been appropriately fulfilled and it is believed that the research questions set out in chapter one were answered:

Research Questions:

1. What impact do Instagram health and fitness influencers have on a person's motivation to participate in exercise and more specifically in online fitness classes? Is there a gender specific attraction to male and female health and fitness influencers?
2. How does the number of followers on an influencers Instagram account affect their follower engagement? What are the implications of this for the influencers themselves and for those hiring influencers?
3. What are the health implications for people who are in sedentary positions for most of their working day? Do they exercise more or less as a direct result of their long periods of sedentary position?

6.3 Research Design

The researcher has endeavoured to act objectively while at once acknowledging the subjectivity inherent in the interpretation of a mixed method research. The research design is credible, and this was established through using both an online survey and netnographic study.

In this study, a qualitative and quantitative approach was used to answer the research questions proposed. Online surveys and netnography was utilised. The survey sample chosen were staff from an Institute of Technology in Ireland (IOT) who were colleagues of the researcher. Netnography was used to gain a deeper understanding on the type of content health and fitness influencers posted on social media and its influence on their followers' engagement in exercise and online fitness classes. Data collection was conducted on the Instagram social media channel of two health and fitness influencers over a four-week period.

This research is conducted and documented in such a way that its approach and research design could be repeated in other context and time. To ensure the dependability, this study has clearly formulated the research problem at the very beginning, the sample was specifically limited to an Institute of Technology and findings from this survey enabled the selection of the health and fitness influencers to conduct the netnographic research.

6.4 Main Findings

Instagram was the most preferred platform for people aged between 40 and 60 years. Notably, the most popular reason for choosing Instagram was its content, photos and familiarity.

Findings show that followers prefer to see genuine posts about the influencers themselves and when an ad is displayed there is less engagement from the tribal community.

Follower count is negatively associated with follower engagement. The higher the follower count the lower the follower engagement. This finding supports the research

by Fohr (2021), who determined that influencers that have the highest engagement rate of all are the ones with less followers.

Motivation and inspiration were two key words used regularly in comments by followers in the netnography study. Whilst many followers may think they have the same meaning, it was apparent in the study of Trishas Transformation that she was on a very personal journey of weight loss and had a deeper emotional bond with her followers on a similar journey, thus the word 'inspiration' was used more commonly by her followers. In comparison, 'motivation' was used quite regularly by followers in the Body Coaches Instagram posts as they were lured by his many posts on fitness and healthy eating tips.

The majority of respondents to the survey stated they have attended both online and face to face classes, however it was clear that they prefer face to face exercise classes over online classes with the main pull factor being social interaction and motivation.

This research study identified that, among those surveyed in sedentary occupations such as a Counsellor and Administration, there was a significantly high level of fitness class attendance. In addition, these fitness classes involved, in the main, high-intensity exercise among other physical exercise activities. This finding was surprising and appears to contrast strongly with a conclusion drawn from the World Health Organisation (2018) survey which indicates that the detrimental effect of sedentary behaviour is stronger among people who have low amounts of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.

A quarter of the respondents from the survey stated that a post shared by a health and fitness influencer, motivated them to try out a fitness class online and less than half will continue to use online fitness classes after lockdown is lifted. In contrast, the evidence from the netnography study suggests that thousands of followers were motivated to exercise not just online, but also through other physical activities such as walking, running etc. and due to the health and influencer social media posts motivated them to do so.

With over half of the survey respondents stating they interact with health and fitness influencers on social media, it is important to note the significance of social media marketing can have on exercise participation. It is also important to note the significant difference in findings from the netnographic study, in relation to peoples' motivation and inspiration to exercise and the disparity compared to the findings in the survey which found that a post by a health and fitness influencer motivated a quarter of respondents to exercise. These results show why it is important to use a mixed method approach method to collect data, as the results from each method can derive different results.

6.6 Recommendations

Several recommendations can be made to influencers, individuals following influencers and companies hiring influencers.

6.6.1 Recommendations for health and fitness influencers

- Instagram is the favoured social media platform to post video and photo content to a fitness audience and close behind is Facebook. Therefore, influencers should ensure they are active on both platforms to reach both their existing and potential consumers. It is recommended that influencers invest more energy into photo content as opposed to videos.
- As an influencer, you are a brand which means you need to create exciting and emotional content for and market to your target audience.
- How big a following to aim for depends on the target niche and financial goals. However, influencers need to consistently engage with their followers as it is not enough to have a following if you are not active with them.
- With entering the social media sphere, members of online communities predominately want to be entertained and inspired by the posts that pop up on their timeline and this can be achieved mainly through content that has an emotional appeal

6.6.2 Recommendations for individuals following influencers

- Videos or live exercise classes that are provided on Instagram by digital celebrities could be used to help start or sustain exercise activities for people that need motivation or social and emotional support. Live workouts or videos could be an alternative to a fitness instructor in a gym environment, particularly if they are not accessible for some individuals locally.
- For people who prefer to attend face to face classes in their locality, following a health & fitness influencer is also encouraged as they can also provide motivation/inspiration and nutritional advice.

6.6.3 Recommendations for companies hiring influencers

- An influencers campaign extends a companies reach to that persons followers so it is important to know the social media metrics of the influencer and then decide if they are in line with the goal of the companies campaign. Knowing that influencers that have the highest engagement rate of all are the ones with less followers may influence smaller to medium sized companies to hire micro-influencers and larger companies may hire mega-influencers.
- Ensure the influencer identifies the post as a sponsored ad

6.7 Future Research

There is ample literature in social media marketing, however, the topic of online fitness classes remains relatively absent in previous literature. In particular, the influence of social media on people's decision to participate in online exercise needs further investigation. Whilst this study focused one social media channel; Instagram, an important direction for future research would be to examine followers and tribal communities on other social media platforms and their intentions to participate in online exercise classes. With Zoom proving to be the most popular medium of delivering online fitness classes for this study, Facebook and Instagram live have become popular delivery channels in recent times and warrant further investigation.

In addition, the research tool proved quite interesting. Whilst surveys were used in conjunction with netnography for this study, perhaps using interviews in conjunction with netnography would wield richer qualitative data for future research.

There are a number of studies that could be further developed such as consumer tribes online and also the ‘why’ behind males only following males and ‘females following males and females observation’ would be fascinating to understand in the future.

6.8 Conclusion

This dissertation investigated the extent of motivations for following health and fitness influencers on social media and its relationship with intentions to participate in general exercise and online fitness classes. Furthermore, motivating exercise through social media is a relatively new area of research and executing a mixed method approach of an online survey and netnography was found to be a suitable fit for this particular area of research.

In addition, the coronavirus lockdown in 2020 has brought about a new wave of interest into the online fitness community, and thanks to social media fitness influencers such as Trishas Transformation and The Body Coach, many of these participants will continue with their exercise long after the lockdown has lifted.

It was also revealed that the follower count on social media is negatively associated with follower engagement. The higher the follower count the lower the follower engagement. As for marketing implications, it has not only profound theoretical meanings but also important managerial meanings.

This research provides evidence that health and fitness influencers have a profound influence on motivating people to exercise and participate in online classes

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Appendix A

Significance of social media marketing and its influence on fitness class participation

This Survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Section 1

Consent - Section 1

1 Please read the following statements and indicate that you consent to taking part in this study by clicking on Yes or No

- Yes
- No

Section 2

Personal Details - Section 2

2 Which gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

3 What County do you currently live in?

4 What age are you?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 39
- 40 to 60
- 60 plus

5 On average, how much money do you spend on fitness training per week? (Including Gym Membership if applicable)

Less than €10

- €11-€19
- €20-€29
- €30-€39
- €40-€49
- €50-€59
- €60 or more
- Nothing

6 What is your average yearly gross income? (including all sources) Remember this study is anonymous

<10,000

10,000-20,000

21,000-25,000

26,000-35,000

36,000-45,000

46,000 - 55,000

56,000 - 65,000

66,000 - 75,000

Greater than 76,000

Prefer not to say

7 What is your current occupation in GMIT?

Section 3

Exercise Behaviour

8 Which of the following types of fitness classes have you participated in?

(choose from the following)

- Face to face traditional fitness classes in a gym or studio?
- Online fitness classes
- Both of the above

9 If you have never participated in an online fitness class please explain your main reason why not, or answer N/A if not applicable

Enter your answer

10 What is your main motivator for attending fitness classes?

11 Which of the following do you prefer?

- Face to face traditional fitness classes
- Online fitness classes
- Neither
- Both

12 How many times a week do you attend the following types of fitness classes?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6+

- Spinning
- High Intensity Interval Training HIIT
- Bootcamp
- Circuit Training
- Pilates
- Yoga
- Tai-chi
- Zumba
- Boxercise
- Crossfit
- Aerobics
- Dancercise
- Pole Fitness
- Strength Training

13 What other type of exercise do you participate in on a weekly basis? Type N/A if not applicable.

Enter your answer

14 In general, would you say your health is :

- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Very Poor

Section 4

Purchase Behaviour - Section 4

15 How did you hear about fitness classes you are currently attending or have attended in the past? (Click all that apply)

- Family or Friend's influence (word of mouth)
- Healthcare Professional's Suggestion
- Social Media
- Printed Poster or Flyer
- Newspaper Ad
- Television or Radio
- Brand Awareness
- Other

16 Please rate the following variable on how you decide to buy/try a fitness class?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

- I use time to research information about the class through search engines, websites, social media, blogs or YouTube
- I make impulse buying decisions
- I listen to recommendation from family or friends

- I look for promotions, deals and discounts
- I buy the same classes every time
- I only consider free online classes
- I buy classes that support my current health and fitness requirements/goals

Section 5

Section 5 - Only complete this section if you HAVE participated in online exercise classes

17 Is the only reason you started participating in online fitness classes due to the fact that gyms are closed due to Covid19?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

18 Will you continue to participate in online fitness classes when the gyms are back open after the lockdown is over?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Not applicable

19 What online platforms do you use for the live online fitness classes?

- Facebook Live
- Instagram Live
- Zoom
- Webex
- Teams
- Mindbody
- gymGO
- Zype
- ClassPass
- Other
- Not applicable

20 Could you describe your expectations and perceptions you felt prior to your first online class?

Enter your answer

21 Could you describe your experience of the online group fitness class and how it made you feel?

Enter your answer

22 Did your actual experience of the online class match your expectations?

Enter your answer

23 How many classes do you complete online each week?

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 6-7
- 7+

Not applicable

24 How much would you expect to pay for one online group fitness class?

- €0-€5
- €6-€10
- €11-€15
- €16-€20
- €21+

Not applicable

25 Do you feel that online classes are good value for money?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

26 Do you think an online class should be cheaper than a traditional face to face fitness class?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

27 What do you think are the advantages to online fitness classes?

Enter your answer

28 Do you think there are any disadvantages to online fitness classes?

- Yes
- No

29 What do you think are the disadvantages to online fitness classes?

Enter your answer

30 Can you suggest any improvement to the delivery of an online fitness classes?

Enter your answer

Section 6

Social Media - Section 6

31 How often do you use the following platforms?

Very Frequently Frequently Occasionally Rarely Never

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Snapchat
- Tik Tok
- Pinterest
- YouTube
- WhatsApp
- Tumblr
- Qzone
- Reddit
- LinkedIn
- Viber

32 Which social media platform is your favourite?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Tik Tok
- Pinterest
- YouTube
- Whats App
- YouTube
- Reddit
- LinkedIn
- Viber
- Tumblr
- Qzone
- Other

33 Why is it your favourite social media platform?

Enter your answer

34 How many hours a day do you spend on social media?

- <1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 5-6 hours
- More than 6 hours
- N/A

35 What is the main reason you use social Media? (Click all that apply)

- To stay in touch with what family and friends are doing
- To stay up-to-date
- To fill up spare time
- To find funny or entertaining content
- General networking with other people
- Because friends are already on them
- To share photos or videos with others
- To research new products to buy
- To meet new people

Other

36 When it comes to Fitness Influencers on social media, do you follow:

- Male
- Female
- Both
- Neither

37 What Fitness Influencers / Gyms do you follow and why?

Enter your answer

38 How often do you interact with fitness influencers through social media by commenting, liking and sharing their posts?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Frequently
- Very Frequently

39 Has a post shared by fitness influencers ever made you do any of the following?

- Try out a new group fitness class online
- Try out a new group fitness class face to face in a gym/studio
- Recommend the class to a friend
- Do nothing

40 How likely are you to share a social media post related to health and fitness with a friend or colleague?

41 Do you agree with the statement: I am more likely to trust a fitness brand if I knew they were actively engaging with their fans or followers on social media?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

42 Do you have any further comments/experiences to add to the entire process?

Appendix B

Email to GMIT Registrar

Dear Mr. Hannon

I am completing my Masters thesis in Digital Media and Marketing in our GMIT Mayo Campus and the title is: 'An investigation into the significance of social media marketing and its influence on adults participating in online exercise classes'.

I am sending you this email to seek your permission to send our GMIT colleagues an online survey to complete as part of my primary research (see attached).

My research proposal has just been approved by the TPREC ethics committee (see attached).

Please also find attached a copy of the participant information form and a copy of the email I will be sending to staff.

If you have any other queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

kind regards

Margaret Mulchrone

Appendix C



Taught Programme Research Ethics Committee (TPREC)
Mayo Campus GMIT
March 16th, 2021

Applicant: Margaret Mulchrone
Supervisor: Ms Noreen Henry
Programme: MSc in Digital Media and Marketing
REF: TPREC_MM/NH_L9_16.03.21

Dear Ms Mulchrone

Thank you for your resubmission of your project proposal entitled '*An investigation into the significance of social media marketing and its influence on adults participating in online exercise classes*', the amendments to, and revisions of which have been reviewed by members of the Mayo Campus TPREC.

The outcome of the TPREC review process is as follows.

Approval

The candidate has sufficiently addressed the issues raised by the TPREC.

The committee would like to compliment you on the professionalism and thoroughness of your application.

Any further changes to research previously approved by a TPREC must be referred for re-approval by the TPREC. We wish you well with this research endeavour.

Sincerely

Dr. Carmel Heaney

On behalf of TPREC, Mayo Campus

Mayo Campus TPREC members:

Dr Evelyn Hannon, Mr Stephen Hannon, Dr Carmel Heaney, Dr Davy Walsh.

All decisions made by the TPREC may be appealed to the Research Sub Committee of Academic Council.

Appendix D

Email to Participants

Dear colleagues,

My name is Margaret Mulchrone, I am completing my Masters thesis in Digital Media and Marketing in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. The title of my thesis is 'An investigation into the significance of social media marketing and its influence on adults participating in online fitness classes'.

I am sending you this email as an invitation to complete an online survey as part of my primary research.

In order to be eligible to complete this survey you **must** be a user of social media and also fulfil **one** or **both** of the following criteria:

- Have participated in a face to face traditional fitness class
- Have participated in an online fitness class

This study involves completing an online survey which should take approximately 10 minutes of your time.

Please find attached a copy of the participant information form. Once you have read through this document, please click this link to complete the survey: [MSForms link](#)

If you have any other queries, please do not hesitate to contact me through this email address: margaret.mulchrone@gmit.ie

Kind regards
Margaret Mulchrone

Appendix E

Please read the following statements and indicate that you consent to taking part in this study by clicking on Yes or No *

- I have read and understand the contents of the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about and what the results will be used for.
- I understand that this survey is anonymous.
- I am aware of the risks associated with this project.
- I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions where I have had a query.
- I have received enough information about this study.
- I understand that my rights regarding confidentiality and anonymity will be observed in the writing up of the data.
- I understand that the results of this research may be published and that my identity shall not be revealed.
- I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.
- I understand that data gathered from this study cannot be used for any purpose outside of this study.
- I understand that all data gathered for this study will be destroyed in five years of its collection and earlier if the data have fulfilled its intended purpose.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research or withdraw my data for any or no reason, up until 1st June 2021.
- Any questions I have concerning the study, before or after I have given consent, can be answered by Margaret Mulchrone at margaret.mulchrone@gmit.ie

Yes

No

Appendix F

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher: Margaret Mulchrone

Study Background and Purpose

The fitness industry today stretches much further than just the gym, fitness has become a phenomenon immersed in the lives of many individuals. Consumers can now choose from a variety of exercise formats from a plethora of local and small/large gyms around the globe, independent personal trainers to Health and Fitness Apps and online fitness influencers.

This study seeks to investigate how social media has influenced peoples' motivation to use online exercise classes as opposed to face to face traditional classes. It also explores the online tribal communities and their support or discontent of the fitness influencers.

What is asked of you?

You will be asked to complete an online survey, sent to you by email and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Value of your contribution

Your contribution to the online survey will assist in the understanding of social media influence towards the motivation of adults exercising.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

To maintain privacy, your data will only be identifiable by a personal ID and not your name. You can choose to have your data excluded from the study and destroyed.

Freedom of Withdrawal

Participation is voluntary and you do not have to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw from this study up until June 1st and are not required to provide a reason.

Contact Information

You can contact the researcher at any time if you have any questions.

Name:

Margaret Mulchrone

E-mail: margaret.mulchrone@gmit.ie

Appendix G



Taught Programme Research Ethics Approval Application Form

Research undertaken by taught students must receive ethical approval unless deemed exempt. This application form may be completed by an individual student or by a Programme Board/Lecturer for a group of similar research projects.

This application is completed by:

Student:

OR

Lecturer on behalf of Programme Board:

PART A

Applicant Details	
Name:	Margaret Mulchrone
Student ID: (if relevant)	G00162799
Programme Title:	MSc in Digital Media & Marketing
Programme Stage:	Stage 2
Research Supervisor's Name: (if relevant)	Noreen Henry

Project Details	
Research Study Title:	An investigation into the significance of social media marketing and its influence on adults participating in online exercise classes.
Research Study Summary (max 100 words): The fitness industry today stretches much further than just the gym, fitness has become a phenomenon immersed in the lives of many individuals. Consumers can now choose from a variety of exercise formats from a plethora of local and small gyms around the globe, independent personal trainers to Health and Fitness Apps and online fitness influencers. The purpose of this research is to focus on the potential role and use of online social media to influence peoples decision on exercise participation. It explores the nature of the online	

marketplace and the nature of peoples' exercise behaviour as revealed by activities on online social media and through a survey.

Risk Checklist

Please answer ALL the questions in each of the sections below – Tick YES or NO

	Will the research study....?	YES	NO
1	Involve direct and/or indirect contact with human participants?	✓	
2	Involve analysis of pre-existing data which contains personal or sensitive information not in the public domain?		✓
3	Require permission or consent to conduct?	✓	
4	Require permission or consent to publish?	✓	
5	Have a risk of compromising confidentiality?		✓
6	Have a risk of compromising anonymity?		✓
7	Collect/contain personal data i.e. any information that relates to an identified or identifiable individual?		✓
8	Collect/contain sensitive personal data e.g. health data, sexual orientation, race religion?	✓	
9	Contain elements which you OR your supervisor are NOT trained to conduct?		✓
10	Use any information OTHER than that which is freely available in the public domain?		✓
11	Involve respondents to the internet or other visual/vocal methods where participants may be identified?		✓
12	Include a financial incentive to participate in the research?		✓
13	Involve our own students or staff?	✓	
14	Take place outside Ireland?		✓
15	Involve participants who are vulnerable or at risk?		✓
16	Involve any participants who are unable to give informed consent?		✓
17	Involve data collection taking place BEFORE informed consent is given?		✓
18	Involve any deliberate deception or covert data collection?		✓
19	Involve a risk to the researcher or participants beyond that experienced in everyday life?		✓
20	Cause (or could cause) physical or psychological harm or negative consequences?		✓
21	Use intrusive or invasive procedures?		✓
22	Involve a clinical trial?		✓
23	Involve the possibility of incidental findings related to participant health status?		✓
24	Involve the remuneration of research participants?		✓

If, as a student, you answered **NO** to all the above questions your research supervisor will review, and if in agreement sign below to indicate that this form does not have to be submitted to the Taught Programme Research Ethics Committee.

<i>Name</i>	Research Supervisor	<i>Signed</i>		<i>Date</i>	
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If you answered **YES** to any of the above questions, you need to complete part B below.

PART B

1	Project Overview
<p>Please give a brief overview of the study, including a summary of the aims and objectives.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> Describe the purpose of the research and what question(s) the project should answer.</p>	
<p>This study seeks to investigate how social media has influenced peoples' motivation to use online exercise classes as opposed to face to face traditional classes. It explores the online tribal communities and their support or discontent of the fitness influencer.</p> <p>Broader research into the concept of online and traditional exercise classes will highlight the concerns and themes in the area and descriptive research will be used to explore the phenomena that already exists.</p> <p>My study is underpinned by the following research question:</p> <p>Primary Research Question:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">What is the impact of social media and social media influencers on peoples motivation to join an exercise class online or face to face?</p> <p>The primary objectives of this research are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify peoples usage of traditional face to face exercise classes and online fitness classes • To determine the impact of social media on peoples decision to attend an online or face to face class • To capture the perceptions and expectations of people using online exercise classes and face to face traditional exercise classes • To observe fitness influencers social media tribal communities and analyse their tribal responses to various postings 	

2	Methodology
<p>Please give a description of the methodology, including any data collection and analysis methods.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> Give an outline of the study here. If the project is complex, you can also submit the research proposal/protocol (no more than 2-3 A4 sides) if this would help the reviewer’s understanding of the project. Include details of your (or the Research Supervisor’s) appropriate skills and qualifications to carry out this research. Consideration of how, and for what duration are stored should be provided under Section 7 below.</p>	
<p>A mixture of primary data collection and secondary data analysis will be undertaken.</p> <p>A mixed method approach of both qualitative and quantitative data collection will be used for the purpose of conducting primary research. The primary research will be carried out over a period of two months (April-May, 2021).</p> <p>I plan on using both a netnographic and online survey research approach. I got the idea of using Netnography as a research approach after listening to Robert Kozinets on a guest lecture appearance on our Post Graduate Certificate Course last year. It is a “research approach belonging to the ethnographic branch, which uses naturalistic analysis techniques (that are immersive and not intrusive) allowing the researcher to empathetically enter the (consumers’) online conversations” Kozinets (2013). In this case, netnography will explore digital tribes and consumer behaviour which will involve the researcher joining online public forums such as Facebook and Instagram to observe and record their discussions for analysis. No private online community groups will be used for the purpose of this research.</p> <p>In addition to netnography, an online survey (see appendix A) will be conducted. It will capture the perceptions, expectations and behaviour of people who exercise through face to face traditional classes and/or online classes and investigate the influence of social media on their decisions to do so. The survey will have 40 questions, a mix of both open and closed ended questions which will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. I plan on emailing the survey to the staff in GMIT (see section 5 for more details). I am aiming for a sample size of 30/40 respondents.</p> <p>I plan on carrying out a pilot study on the online survey by emailing 5 colleagues, who I know will complete the survey. I will seek their feedback and recommendations on the type of questions asked and length of time it took them to complete the whole survey. From this I may remove some of the survey questions that I feel are not appropriate to the goal of the study.</p> <p>A may look at a statistical analysis tool, either Excel, Nvivo or SPSS to analyse the data collected and identify correlations. Thematic analysis may be carried out by identifying themes which will be coded to identify trends.</p>	

3	Main Ethical Considerations
<p>Please give a brief description of the main ethical considerations involved in the study.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> Highlight here the main ethical considerations for the study (which may concern, e.g., the type of participants, the sensitive nature of the study, the data collection process, security-sensitive research) and advise how the main issues will be addressed. If the project is funded, give details here, and whether there are any potential conflicts of interest involved in the study. NB: Section 5 below addresses: recruitment; voluntary participation; consent; and, the right to withdraw. Those details need not also be entered here.</p>	
<p>Confidentiality is the main ethical consideration. The project is not funded and there is no potential conflicts of interest. The data collected is not of a sensitive nature.</p> <p><u>Survey</u></p> <p>No E-signature will be requested as the survey is anonymous.</p> <p>An online survey will be designed and completed by adults only, who have a social media account and attended either a traditional face to face or online exercise class.</p> <p>I am aware there may be an age bias as the survey is going to be sent to all GMIT staff and I am fully aware that all staff are over the age of 18.</p> <p>Variables will be measured or observed e.g. age/gender/education level/ attitude towards something. How does one variable influence another variable? How does income levels influence the use of online technology? I will be using Microsoft forms as a medium of distributing the questions to the target audience.</p> <p><u>Netnography</u></p> <p>According to Kozinets (2020) significant amounts of research and literature have emerged in the past decade to enlighten our perspective on what constitutes ethical online research and ethical online versions of ethnography, including netnography. According to Kozinets (2002), netnography uses the publicly available information in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups. “It is a way to understand the discourse and interactions of people engaging in computer-mediated communication about market-oriented topics”.</p> <p>Kozinets reiterates that ethical challenges in netnography are primarily on two non-trivial, contestable and related concerns. One of them is, is the online site a netnographer is studying or intend to study a private or public site? Secondly, in an online setting, what constitutes informed consent? According to Langer and Beckman (2005), ethical guidelines in netnography are too rigorous, and it further endangers the unobtrusiveness of online communication studies. A Clear consensus has not emerged in terms of these ethical questions. It remains a challenge.</p> <p>Mkono, (2016) argues that from an ethical and functional standpoint, netnography also lends itself to the question of authenticity of narratives, that is, are the narrators in fact who they claim to be?. There is the possibility of business representatives masquerading as ordinary contributors. It is legitimate to state however in this particular study that, given the scope of narratives of particular interest, engaging</p>	

with the moral and ethical dilemmas of Fitness, the likelihood of ‘fake’ participants is minimal, but not precluded.

Online social interactions through **publicly** available messages observed on social media will be archived for analysis.

To clarify, I as the researcher will not use a false name when following the public social media posts. Several netnographic authors are unequivocal about identify deception Kozinets (2020).

Using contemporary search engines, many netnographic quotes and verbatim are easily traceable to other identifiers of a contributor to the research; this is the reason for my stringency and as a precaution I will not be publishing direct quotes for public viewing.

In advance of data collection, I have a responsibility to think through my duty of care in order to recognise potential risks, and to prepare for and be in a position to minimise and manage any distress or discomfort that may arise.

For both my online survey and netnography study, I have a moral, legal, and ethical obligation to treat the persons behind the data with dignity and to handle their data with respect and keeping accuracy and truth always in mind.

There will be no sensitive topics and no vulnerable populations the topic if discussions will be around Fitness. Also, because of the public nature of the sites from which the postings will be extracted, the identities of the all subjects’ comments will be appropriately anonymised, and the data securely stored on my Microsoft OneDrive account, where the folder will be password protected and so too is my computer. I have created a flow chart (figure 1) that displays the exact ethical procedures that I will follow for my stud, which ensures ethics is adhered to at all times.

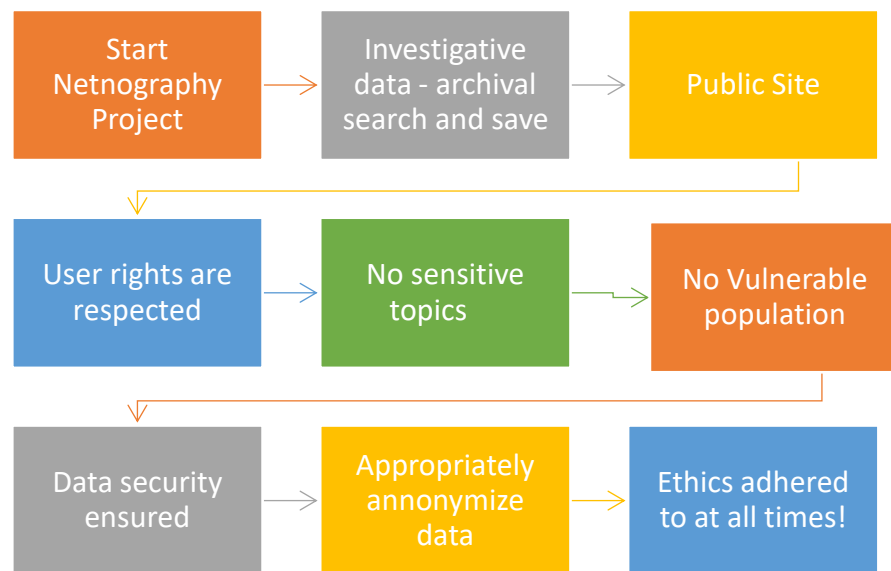


Figure 1 A research ethics process flowchart for netnography

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4	Human Participants
<p>If the study includes Human Participants (or their data), please give a description of who will be included.</p> <p><u>Help:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please note this should include sample size/number of participants, whether the project will focus on any particular groups/individuals, if it will include any at risk or vulnerable participants, participants aged 16 years or under, etc. Please also specify the rationale for including / excluding groups of participants. • If the research involves secondary data not in the public domain, give details in this section. 	
<p>The participants in the online survey are adults over the age of 18 and sample size is approximately 30/40</p> <p>My netnographic involvement in the social media platforms will be to monitor fitness influencers and their followers, therefore this data will already be in the public domain.</p>	

5	Recruitment, Voluntary Participation, Consent and Right to Withdraw
<p>If the study includes Human Participants, please give a brief description of the recruitment process, how voluntary participation will be ensured, if (and how) informed consent will be obtained prior to participants taking part in the study, and the right of withdrawal from the research process.</p> <p><u>Help:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This should include clear information on how participants will be identified, approached and recruited; whether the study will include any covert research or deliberate deception; whether help is required from a third party/ gatekeeper to access participants; what information will be given to participants, etc. • If expenses or any incentives are to be offered to participants, give full details. • If research involves students, colleagues and/or other employees then specify the rationale for this and how issues of coercion or feelings of obligation will be addressed. • <u>If data is held on participants, research using that data may require permission from the participant.</u> 	

- Regarding withdrawal from the study, discuss the different stages/dates a participant could withdraw or withdraw their data, and how they could do this.

Stratified sampling will be used initially. The stratum will firstly involve an online survey and the second stage of the research will involve a netnographic study of a fitness influencer

Online Survey

For the primary part of the study which involves an online survey, **informed consent** is required and mandatory. Subjects (in this case GMIT staff members) will be invited into the study by email (see appendix A), which clearly states they must answer 'Yes' after reading the consent section on the survey before they continue to answer the questions.

Once they click on the survey, the first section they read is a very detailed consent section (see appendix B) which is a required section to complete with Yes/No answer before they are permitted access to complete the survey.

Attached to the same email will be a participant information sheet (see appendix C) detailing the study background and purpose outlining what is asked of them, the value of contribution, confidentiality and freedom of withdrawal is explained.

Please see section 7 for further clarity on measures I have taken to accord participants confidentiality and anonymity.

The pilot study will involve an email to five GMIT staff (see section 2) receiving the same appendices mentioned above.

No incentives will be used to avoid bias and to promote voluntary participation.

To participate in the online survey respondents must be a user of social media fall into one or both of the following categories which will be explained in an **email** to them (see appendix A):

- Have participated in a face to face traditional exercise class
- Have participated in an online exercise class

The reasoning behind this selection process is that one of the research questions is to determine the influence or non-influence of social media in choosing a particular channel of exercise.

Netnography

As a researcher of qualitative inquiry, I hold the belief that netnography should try to sensitively reflect a concern for the perspective of those it seeks to understand. I also believe that conducting a netnography that is both ethical and effective is important.

There is great debate around the issue of consent in netnography. Kozinets argues that in today's world, most people know that their postings and information on social media can be read by the general public and depending on the type of netnography approach consent may not be required.

Kozinets suggests that there are three distinct kinds of netnographic data collection procedures (1) archival search and save, (2) the capture of your own personal notes, observations and screen captures, and (3) direct communications with people either on a public platform or through a more private medium like direct messaging or email. These three categories of data are called investigative, immersive and interactive. The latter two categories of data collection will require written consent.

For the purpose of my netnographic study I will be viewing the postings of a **public** page of a fitness influencer, on both their Instagram and Facebook accounts. No private communities will be used within any online site.

Upon collecting the responses from the survey I will analyse the answer to the question “Which Fitness Influencer do you follow on Social Media?”. From this type of snowballing research, I will source the most popular Fitness Influencer to conduct the netnography.

I will be utilizing an investigative data collection method where I will look at archival data and save the results and therefore consent is not required. My position on the social media platforms will be as a follower. I will not be making any contributions to the forums as my sole is to collect data.

6	Risks and Benefits
<p>Please give a brief description of how, when and where the research will take place and whether there are any risks and/or benefits involved.</p> <p><u>Help:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This should include information on what participants will be required to do, the rationale for this and the level of risk involved. • When considering risks, please refer to risks to the participants (e.g., for research in sensitive areas, where there is a balance of power), the researcher, any other parties to the research; and also any health and safety issues for anyone involved (e.g., for lone researchers carrying out fieldwork). <p>In this study the only potential risk is if the data I have collected and stored safely on my one drive is hacked and stolen.</p> <p>For the netnographic research, I will follow the fitness influencers through their social media channels and be an observer in the study.</p> <p>As the online survey will be emailed to participants there will be no face to face contact with any participant.</p>	

7	Personal Data, Anonymity and Confidentiality
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Please specify what type of information/data will be collected/analysed and the source(s). In addition, specify if and how the anonymity of participants will be ensured, and information be kept confidential.

Help: This should include information on whether new information/data are being collected or uses data that are already in the public domain; whether the data includes personal data; whether the data includes sensitive personal data e.g. health data, sexual orientation, race, religion; how the data will be processed and stored; who will have access to it; who it will be shared with; how long data will be retained; how it will be destroyed; the Data Protection requirements for any sensitive personal data, etc. In addition, include whether there may be any requirements for disclosure of information to other parties due to professional practice or legal reasons. If there are limits to confidentiality, explain clearly how the participants would be advised about these limits and possible outcomes.

I recognise the entitlement of participants to privacy and will accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity.

Upon designing the online survey in Microsoft Forms I have insured the Record Name button is unclicked – thus ensuring anonymity (see figure 2)

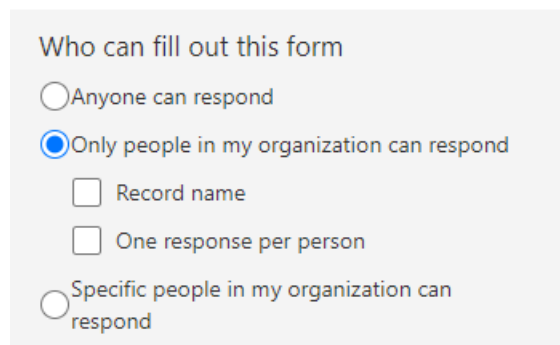


Figure 2 Anonymous survey confirmation

For the netnographic research the data will be collected from public social media channels. The social media influencer will not be anonymous as they are public figures. However, the followers of these influencers that I research will have numeric codes replacing their names, to protect their identity. The codes for the netnographic study will be N1 for netnographic 1, N2 etc.

For the survey I will use a similar coding pattern i.e. R1 for respondent 1, R2 for respondent 2 etc.

The data collected will be securely stored on my password protected GMIT onedrive account. Access to raw data will be limited to myself and my supervisor and, potentially, examiners. Data will be retained for 3 years. Following this period, all electronic copies of the data will be deleted from all storage folders.

Details from the netnography study and online survey will be kept for a period of up to three years for examination and the possibility of publishing a paper purposes.

8	Reporting and Dissemination
<p>Please give details of the planned dissemination and specify if the findings from the research will be published and whether any permission is required for this.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> This should include information on the methods of dissemination (e.g., dissertation/thesis) and/or what will be published and where (research papers, conference presentations). Specify if any permission is needed (e.g., from participants, clients, gatekeepers, etc.) prior to publication, and whether there are any potential issues relating to Intellectual Property Rights when creating or using materials.</p>	
<p>The data collected will be used for the purpose of this thesis and may be journal publications. Keeping this in mind, the participants will remain anonymous and their identities will not be revealed in the dissemination of the research.</p>	

9	Location of research
<p>Will the research take place outside of Ireland?</p>	
<p>YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If yes, give details below.</p>	
<p><u>Help:</u> If yes, please specify where the research will take place. Research must comply with the laws of the country where it is taking place and also comply with local Data Protection and Intellectual Property legislation: you must confirm that your research is compliant with local requirements and how you have ascertained this. Advise if the project requires ethical approval in-country and how this has been ascertained. If approval is required, a copy of this should be included in the application or details of the process of how it will be obtained. Please make reference to insurance and indemnity cover for the project where relevant.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> If data is to be processed or stored outside the EEA contact dpo@gmit.ie</p>	
<p>The research will take place in Ireland. The participants for the online survey will be within Ireland. However, the netnographic data that will be gathered through public online social media channels may be from people all over the world who are followers of fitness influencers.</p>	

10	Collaborative Projects
<p>Is the research a collaborative project (i.e., it involves more than one institution)?</p>	
<p>YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If yes, give details below.</p>	

<p><u>Help:</u> If yes, please specify the other institutions involved and if ethical approval needs to be / has been given by them. Please also specify what procedures have been put in place to ensure ethical compliance from all partners.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> If personal data is being shared between institutions then a data sharing agreement must be in place. Contact dpo@gmit.ie</p>	
N/A	
11	Any other permission or external ethical approval required to undertake the project
<p>Please specify if the project requires any other ethical approval or permissions not mentioned previously in this application and how and when these will be obtained.</p> <p><u>Help:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other permissions: ethical approval does not give the right of access to the Institute's students, staff or the use of Institute premises to carry out research, and you may need to contact an appropriate Institute gatekeeper for agreement to approach potential participants or for the use of premises, so please give details. • Gatekeepers: permission of a gatekeeper for initial access to participants may be required or to carry out data collection on their premises. • If the project requires approval from an external ethics committee, this should normally be obtained prior to submitting this application. • If a Disclosure and Barring Service check is required due to the specific participant group, give details. • Regarding insurance and indemnity cover, some projects will require individual confirmation of cover. See the Research Ethics Procedures document for more details. 	
<p>As an employee of GMIT I will contact the registrar (see appendix D) who is the relevant gatekeeper and seek his permission to approach my fellow colleagues with an email regarding the online survey. I have already contacted our GDPR officer in GMIT and they have advised me that it would be appropriate for me to email the survey directly from my staff email as it is my place of work. Therefore, I will be using my staff email as my point of contact for all the communication literature with my colleagues in GMIT.</p>	

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION: what to submit with the application

For projects involving human participants, you must submit, where appropriate, the Participant Information Sheet/s and consent form/s. You must also submit every communication a participant will see or receive. Failure to do so will cause delays to the application.

Appendix H

Social Media Global Statistics

Digital (2021), proposes that nearly 60 percent of the world's population is already online. According to their research, in January 2021 over 4.66 billion people around the world used the Internet, up by 316 million (7.3 percent) since this time last year and global internet penetration now stands at 59.5 percent. Social media user numbers increased by more than 13 percent in 2020, with nearly half a billion new users taking the global user total to almost 4.2 billion by the start of 2021. Research from (Statista, 2020a), asserts that 80% of the world's active internet users are social media users. Staggering figures from Digital (2021), advise that on average 1.3 million new users joined social media every day during 2020, equating to roughly 151/2 new users every single second and COVID=19 has not affected the amount of time people are spending each day on social media (*see figure 1*).



Figure 1 Digital around the world: Source: (Digital 2021: Global Overview Report)

A very interesting trend in evolving search behaviours is the rise of social search. Approximately 45 percent of global internet users say that they turn to social networks at least once per month when looking for information about products or services that they're thinking of buying. The highest trend is amongst younger age groups (Generation Z) who are now more likely to start their brand research on social networks than they are to turn to a search engine.

According to a report from SproutSocial (2021), 57% of consumers will follow a brand to learn about a new product or services while 47% will follow to stay up to date on company news. After following a brand on social media, consumers continue to engage in various ways. Ninety-one percent visit the brands website or app, 89% will buy from the brand and 85% will recommend the brand to a family or friend. When asked what type of content they like to engage with, 68% of consumers preferred images, 50% preferred videos ad 30% enjoyed text-based posts. The top four reasons consumers will unfollow a brand on social media are poor quality or product or support (48%), poor customer service (49%), irrelevant content (45%) and (45%) are because of too many ads (see figure 2)

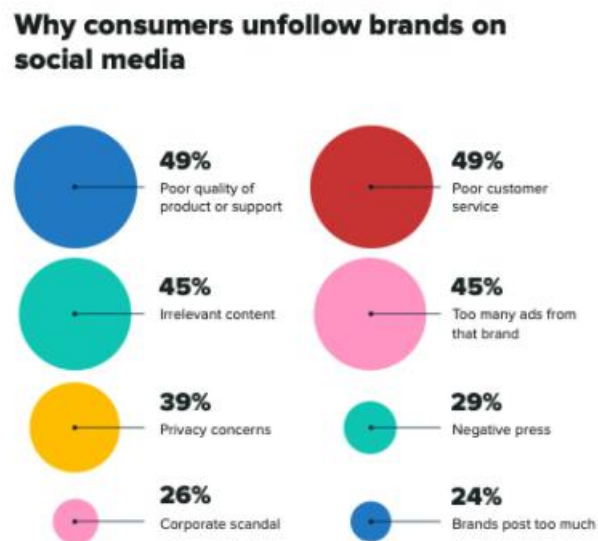


Figure 2 Why consumers unfollow brands on social media – Sprout Social Index 2021

Types of Social Media Platforms

There are a range of social media platforms, available to users. Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Instagram allow people of all age groups to aggressively share their information and interest through a set of clicks on the computing gadgets which is accessible to non-technical communities. Facebook still wears the crown as most popular social media brand when it comes to social with YouTube coming in second place and what’s interesting to note is that messengers such as WhatsApp and Facebook messenger are closing the gap (see figure 3). Increasingly social media services face tough competition and can lose relevance quickly. For instance, Ericson

(2018), indicated that 5 out of the 10 most popular social media platforms of 2008 no longer exist (Windows Live Spaces, Yahoo! GeoCities, Orkut, Baidu Space, Friendster) and only one of them (Facebook) remain among the 10 most popular.

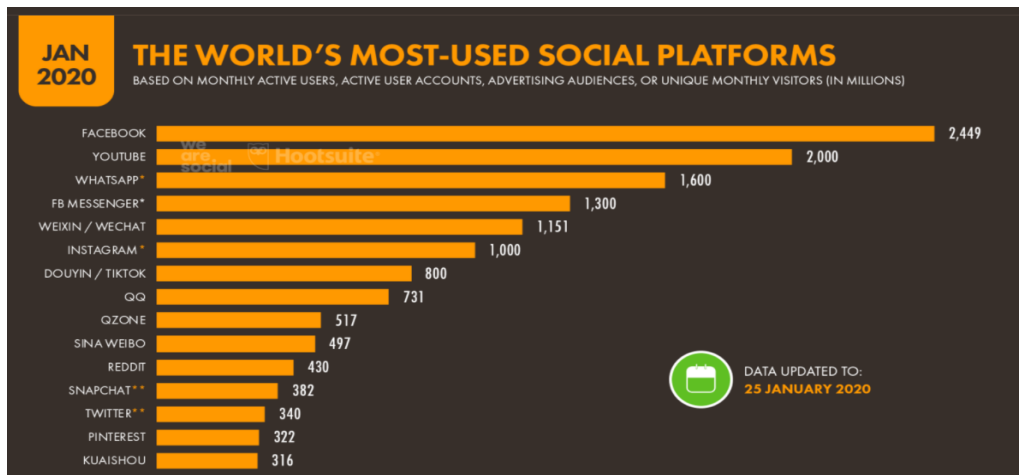


Figure 3 World's most-used social platforms: Source Digital 2021: Global Overview Report – Hootsuite

Furthermore, Advertising & Media Outlook suggest that 34 percent of global media sales were generated digitally in the 2020 – five percentage points more than in 2019. However, the growth in upcoming years is expected to be less steep (Statista, 2021a). Asia are the lead force with the United States growing at a similar rate and Europe lags when it comes to monetising online content (see figure 4).

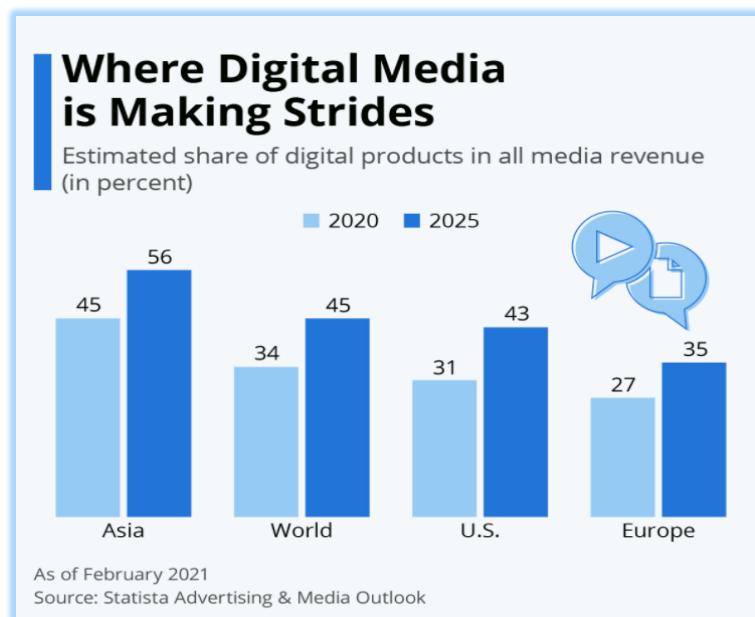


Figure 4 Where Digital Media is Making Strides (Statista, 2020)

Instagram

Instagram is a visual native site built on the idea of communicating and interacting through photographs (Kozinets, 2020). It was launched in 2010 and it allows users to upload photos and videos to the platform. Similar to Twitter and Facebook the photographs can be classified with hashtags, comments and location information. It is owned by Facebook and it integrates very effectively with the Facebook advertising platform. Instagram is a fully visual and mobile experience, where users can take, enhance, manipulate, and share photographs with their friends and followers. Its audience is younger than the Facebook audience, and more mobile, too. Marketers can advertise on Instagram through Facebook. In this way, it offers access to a younger audience, which can supplement or support the older audience of Facebook within a company's social media campaign.

According to Sprout Social (2021), Instagram has 1 billion monthly active users and 500 million of them use Instagram Stories and the target demographic on the network is women aged 18-24 years old. There were 1,895,000 Instagram users in Ireland in March 2020 which accounted for 38.3% of its entire population (see figure 5). The majority of them were women – 57.9% and between the age of 25 to 34 (NapoleonCat, 2020).

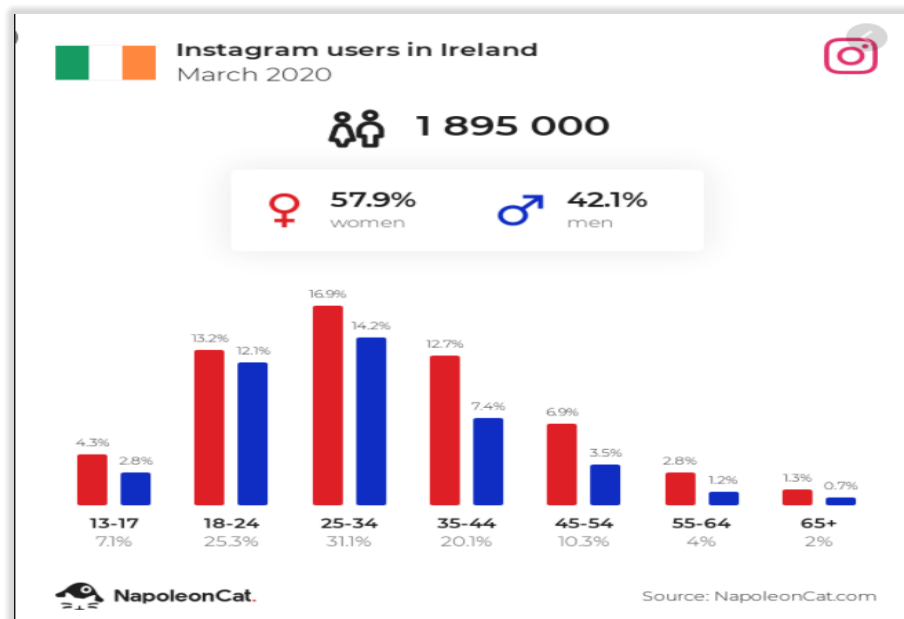


Figure 5 Instagram users in Ireland

The all-industry median benchmark for Instagram engagement rate per post is 1.22%. This median has decreased by 23% from 1.6% in 2019 (see figure 6).

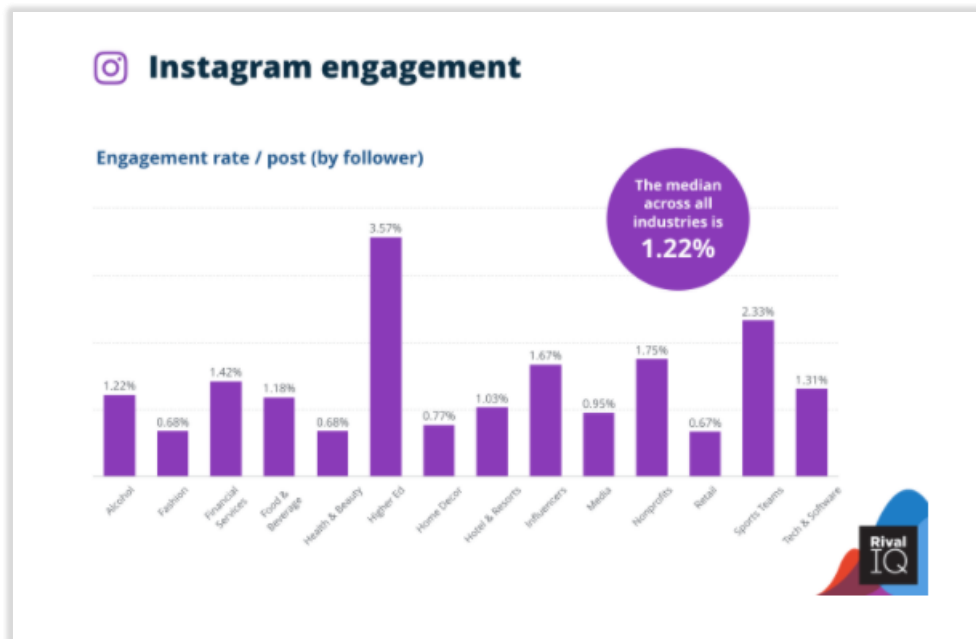
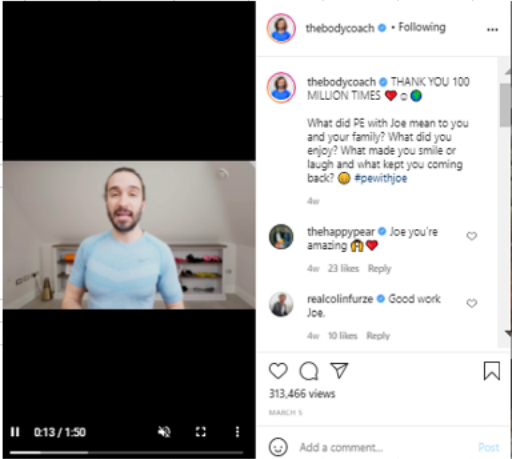


Figure 6 Instagram engagement - Sprout Social (2021)

Appendix I

Video 2		This video appears to have prompted very emotional responses from fans	My view April 7th 2020
Mar-05	Exercise	PE with Joe Proudest thing he ever done	
	Very emotional goodbye PE with Joe message, completed 150 workouts for free (20 min video)	fitter stronger and healthier, mentioned money raised with healthcare system charity	sounded very sincere
	Thank you video to everyone who watched PE with Joe on YouTube	"Always feel better afterwards" positive message mental health	spoke passionately
	very uplifting video to watch	"never let a ripper out off camera" he uses humour and his fans see him as human	similar to Trisha he uses humour and honesty in his posts and this visibly draws a closer bond with this fans
	work hard, have fun and be nice is his motto in life	loubyloulabelle I will always remember PE with Joe. I had never tried a hit workout before last March and you have converted me to them 100% I now often go onto your you tube and do the workouts. I needed some solid exercise as the gym was off limits and your workouts have provided that and proved how much i can do at home. Its so tru what you say about exercise helping with mental health, i have	there is a general vibe of appreciation and praise for all the videos he's provided for free to the nation
	<p>myownhealthfirst What an absolute legend Joe, I don't think you realise you just switched on a whole generation or two to regular exercise in their day, who probably didn't even like it before! You should be proud</p> <p>irenesantineer I don't think you will ever know the impact you have made on people lives @thebodycoach. Thank you for inspiring me to rethink about exercise. That it is now something fun, enjoyable, healthy for my mind and body. It is no longer a chore (Well maybe at the beginning!) and I know I will feel amazing for the rest of the day. You brought about that change in my mindset and I'm not alone there. Thank you to you, Rosie, Indie and Marley for adding so</p> <p>fred.and.george_cats I really enjoyed PE with Joe it gave me an amazing start to the day. Me my sister and my mum did it most days and although it may be tough during the workouts we always felt great afterwards</p> <p>always felt that. I hanks so much for your time and effort 🙏🙏🙏</p>	<p>(fun and be nic N1 advice</p> <p>albertosalvi_fitnessolutions That's amazing Joe, you are incredible! I did enjoy your creativity, imagination, passion and the consistency of all your hard work. I did also enjoy you farthing live 🤔 and your sense of humour. #topfitnessinfluencer</p> <p>blackmoresoph Give this man a knighthood already!</p> <p>emmahaddaway You been amazing x</p> <p>ange868 I've learnt that exercise does make you feel better. It improves your mood and even when you can't be bothered! I've been able to improve my fitness and do exercises that I thought would be beyond me. I'm still struggling with a burpee - the knees protest! Thank you for your time, energy and motivation. I will carry on and use your videos online. ❤️</p> <p>Thank you to your invisible but vital team for all their hard work. You are all amazing and loved ❤️❤️</p>	<p>another word that keeps coming up is support, very positive impact he has had on people of all ages from kids to adults, was something the whole family could do. People found it motivating and kept coming back week after week,</p> <p>people describe him as: amazing, legend, incredible words such as respect, proud</p> <p>lots of people mention they didn't know how to exercise</p> <p>people mention they are lbs lighter and fitter</p> <p>a lot of emotion in the comments "I'm am emotional wrecked, words cannot describe how grateful I am", "I'm watching this through happy hears Joe. This has been such a positive part of lockdown, lovely memories made.</p> <p>20 min video is actually perfect length to keep attention</p> <p>most people referred to him as Joe and not the Bodycoach</p> <p>There's no doubt his fan base grew massively throughout the lockdown and with his insta follow numbers going up thanks to his free workouts to the nation, I'm just wondering was there a hidden agenda behind all these free classes or did he do it out of the goodness of his heart? Since lockdown eased he's plugging his paid app almost every other day on</p> <p>He did get an MBE from the Queen for all his effort</p> <p>all messages from fans were very positive</p> <p>It's obvious that many fans started exercising for the first time online because of Joe, he has boasted morale, and people who never exercised are feeling more confident in themselves. So many people are feeling happier directly because of joes online exercise videos and it's clear he have motivated the nation to exercise. Definetly picked a super example of an influencer who</p>